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# Long Ago and Far Away

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Jan. 17—Ten years ago this week, John F. Kennedy became President. It seems like yesterday in some ways. The snowy night before in Washington, the cold clear morning on the Capitol Plaza, that confident young Bostonian voice—the memories are sharp.

But in other ways it seems another age altogether, long ago. The inaugural address, reread, turns out to have had not a word in it about America's internal problems. Can there really have been a time, so recent, when they did not preoccupy us?

And the rhetoric: In hindsight, much of what moved us then strikes us now as not only faded but wrong. "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." It was the national attitude reflected in such language—the belief in a dutiful American omnipotence—that led us to Vietnam.

Many who admired John Kennedy would find much to criticize in those early days, and not only rhetoric: the bellicose posture toward Cuba, the arousal of fear over a nonexistent missile gap, the wishful elements in the Alliance for Progress, the alarmist air raid shelter program.

Yet those particular misjudgments are not the real legacy of the Kennedy Administration. If they were, we should remember the three years as a time of gloom and fear, whereas the opposite is the case. Most people would probably agree with Lord Harlech, British Ambassador in Washington then and the President's friend, in saying:

"The Kennedy period was the last in which there was a feeling of optimism abroad in the world. From 1961 to 1963 we were all of good

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cheer. No one would think of using such an expression today."

Why was it so? In part the spirit of the Kennedy period represented a last glow of liberal optimism, a societal confidence since overwhelmed by the appalling problems of war and race and poverty and pollution. But the good cheer came also from the President himself, and from something beyond his personal qualities of courage and humor.

There may be a clue in two speeches of Kennedy's two and one-half years after the inaugural. He made them on successive days, June 10 and 11, 1963, and together they are a remarkable testimony of his development as a politician and a man.

The first was the American University speech, on peace and disarmament. Gone was the rhetoric of the cold war, the picture of America as a white knight riding to save all mankind. We do not seek a "Pax Americana," the President said. If we want the Soviet Union to adopt a more enlightened attitude in the world, "we must re-examine our own." Instead of "distributing blame or pointing the finger of judgment," we should try to develop our mutual interests with the Soviet Union.

Then, the next evening, after a confrontation over desegregation at the University of Alabama, he spoke to the nation on television. The speech had been written hurriedly and was not complete; toward the end he spoke extemporaneously. No President before had spoken so directly, so emotionally, about race and discrimination:

"Are we to say to the world—and much more importantly to each other—that this is the land of the free,

except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens, except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race, except with respect to Negroes?"

Eight days later he proposed the most comprehensive civil rights bill in our history. It included a provision that most would previously have dismissed as fantasy—a ban on discrimination in restaurants and other public accommodations.

That was a President who had not seemed especially sensitive to racial discrimination, who had said that needed Federal action could be taken administratively rather than through the politically difficult course of seeking new legislation. He had changed his mind.

The ability to change—to learn from events, to listen to reasoned argument, to admit mistakes—was a good part of the Kennedy secret. It was not changeableness one sensed, or equivocation; it was development.

It is on that quality that historians may eventually have to rest, for example, as they examine the unanswerable question of how Vietnam would have gone had Kennedy lived. One can only guess that he would have learned from the military and political blunders and been ready to change course much sooner than the unfortunate successor on whom, unprepared by experience or character, the Vietnam crisis fell.

Openness was what John Kennedy projected. While he was President, anyone could feel that new ideas had a chance, that change was possible. Not only Americans drew hope from that quality in their President; that was clear when astonishing millions around the world mourned his death. They understood that the most powerful man in the world was a man who listened.