

Tragic costs of the Presidency

NEW YORK, (N.Y.)—In the heat of the battle against swollen and corrupt presidential power, it isn't a good memorial to John Kennedy—a decade after his death—to distort the meaning of his tragically brief tenure of power, and to join in the weakening of the Presidency he tried to keep strong, constitutional—and honest.

The life of the Presidency has been experience—the burdens of crisis, the struggles with other branches of government, the character, ability and credibility of particular Presidents.

John Kennedy was young, bright, appealing, open to experience. His America was battered by challenges from without and within. His problem was in the long-range choices he had to make, where he lacked some of the gut instinct of Harry Truman.

He was learning when he was cut down.

TODAY WE ARE in mortal battle over the Presidency. We had best keep in mind the long historical purpose in all the effort to flesh out the Constitution in practice.

Vermont's Sen. George Aiken had a truth by the tail when he spoke of how we have used up our Presidents pitilessly. We do it, events do it, the system does it, the Presidents themselves do it destructively to themselves.

Consider the record.

We killed Abe Lincoln not just by Booth's bullet but before that—by the tensions of a Civil War and the attacks he had to bear. We tried to impeach Andrew Johnson by the outburst of Radical Republican virtue against a Tennessee Democratic tailor who had notions of his own about Reconstruction. We did Gen. Ulysses Grant the indignity of putting him in a presidential post he was as unfitted for as he was fitted for his military one.

We cheated an able man, William Tilden, out of the presidential election he had earned and put a genial lesser man in his place. We killed James Garfield and we later killed William McKinley, neither of them any great shakes as President but both the victims of crazed passions operating absurdly. We gave Theodore Roosevelt the chance for a glory flight and then broke his heart as well as his vanity—not to speak of almost getting him killed by a bullet.

WE ALSO BROKE Woodrow Wilson's heart and perhaps his mind by the burdens of a war and the frustrations of an impossible peace. We picked a weak, foolish man, Warren Harding, and subjected him to venalities that corrupted and perhaps killed him.

We picked an able man, Herbert Hoover, for an office too big for him, and drove him from it when he couldn't meet its crises.

When Franklin Roosevelt showed he could fill the office strongly, we gave him a fourth turn at it, then killed him with its sheer burdens of war and alliance and peace. We harassed Harry Truman over his chronic cronyism, but his large decisions were great, and he fought back and survived—and prevailed. We strained Dwight Eisenhower's heart and frame, then watched him lose his two chiefs of staff—Dulles, by the wrenching tensions of foreign policy; Sherman Adams, by outraged virtue over a minor transgression.

WE WERE SEDUCED, charmed, delighted by John Kennedy—and then we killed him. We inherited Lyndon Johnson, then picked him again, presumably for his skill and strength, only to drive him out of office for bogging us down in Vietnam, breaking his heart in the process.

I stop short at Richard Nixon on whose labors and sins — and he has done both mightily — the judgment of history is not yet in. What we do know is that he surrounded himself with a power-corrupted Palace Guard, and that whether or not he has himself been "crooked" (to use his own term), he has certainly been shadowy and slippery.

It is now likely that he will survive politically. But he is another chapter in the unfinished history of the tragic Presidency, victim as well as predator of the most powerful office in the history of any democracy.