

Time Remembered

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 21—I was at the University of Chicago Law School, attending a conference. A student came into the room and made an announcement: There had been shooting in Dallas.

It is familiar for all of us to remember how we heard on Nov. 22, 1963; to relive those moments. But the familiar sometimes still needs exploration. We do not yet understand enough about how the assassination affected us then and has continued to affect us to this day.

When John Kennedy was killed, millions wept. They had feelings strong enough to break the ordinary restraints on public expression of grief. Those feelings are a reality of history, and a deeply significant one.

Human beings evidently have a need for emotions, for attachments, not only in their private world but in society. They want to identify with a country, an idea, a person. There was something in Kennedy that met that need in a way no other public figure has in our time. There was something whose loss this country has found hard to bear.

What was it? Not policy surely. He made mistakes, bad ones, beginning with the Bay of Pigs. His programs were criticized then and have been scourged by the debunkers since. But the revisionists have not been able to explain away the fact of Kennedy's impact, in life and death.

Ask diverse Americans what feelings he gave them as President, and the same answers come again and again: Hope. Confidence. Trust. Those had to be reflections of his character. People were moved by their perception not

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of what he did but of what he was.

Humanity was one of his characteristics, and how important it seems after these last ten years. His skepticism, his sense of the absurd in life, his recognition of failure were all directed at himself as much as anyone. He never had the notion that he was ruling by divine right. He kept his sense of proportion.

Balancing the skepticism was first of all his respect for the Presidential office, his understanding that it is our symbol of nobility. It is hard to imagine him doing a mean or vulgar thing under that title. Then there was his inner confidence, his joy in challenge. He did not waste a visible moment being sorry for himself.

From the qualities of realism, respect, courage he drew the ability to admit error—that rare weapon in the politician's armory. When he took the blame for the Bay of Pigs, he meant it. He did not say it in a pro forma way; he did not fault underlings or the press.

Perhaps most important was a willingness to learn from experience. He was open to criticism, to ideas. He could do that most difficult thing for any adult: change. And so he gave ordinary citizens the hope of change, the hope even of being able to influence the future themselves.

Searching for his political pattern, David Broder of The Washington Post concluded that Kennedy campaigned and governed by forcing issues into the open for public discussion, and that he was prepared ultimately to accept public judgment. In short, he was ready to listen.

That is probably the best answer to the question of what he would have done about Vietnam. He would have understood the opposition to the war as it arose, and he would not have let his own ego get in the way of adjusting to the country's deepening perception. As one wise person has put it, he had some windows on this country.

What it all adds up to for me is this: John Kennedy seemed to most Americans a man entitled to govern a democratic country. He had somehow solved the mystery that has puzzled poets and philosophers, the mystery of the link between governor and governed. He had legitimacy.

Looking at his brief Presidency in those terms helps us to understand why his death was so painful and why its trauma has lingered. Psychologically, that assassination was a break in legitimacy for this country. It was like the terrible event in a Greek drama, dooming generations until it is resolved.

At first, Lyndon Johnson seemed to be succeeding in the attempt to provide a new legitimacy. But then openness in Government gave way to deception and seclusion, public trust to disappointment, cynicism, anger. Until at last a President doubtful of public trust, in effect doubting his own political legitimacy, thought he had to govern by aggression, in a state of siege.

When anyone dies, those who knew him feel the touch of mortality themselves. The death of a young and vigorous leader with whom we identified made life seem more dangerous for all of us, and more transient. But beyond that self-concern we had reason to grieve.