

First broadcast on

December 3, 1963

KENNEDY, JOHNSON, AND THE FUTURE

The terrible crime which took the life of President John F. Kennedy has left the nation in a state of confusion and uneasiness. The image which we have had of ourselves as a peaceful, stable society has been seriously damaged, and we are wondering what has happened to us, and what the future may bring. Why was the President killed? Was it the act of a single neurotic individual or the culmination of a conspiracy? Why was the assassin murdered? Why did the authorities appear to be covering something up? Why did so few people of prominence question the obvious contradictions in the information coming from Dallas: Why did Americans ask questions only after Europeans had asked them first?

These are disturbing questions. And there are many more. They leave the thoughtful citizen with a deep sense that there is something fundamentally and dangerously wrong with our society.

There have been two characteristic reactions to this uneasiness. One has been an outpouring of extravagant praise for the dead President; the other has been a chorus of voices calling for unity, an end to divisions among us, and a rallying behind the new President. These are natural reactions, and in general good ones. But there comes a time when we must recover our composure, arrest the development of mythology, and recognize that the essential feature of a democratic society is its tolerance of diversity of opinion, and its reverence for reasoned public discussion and controversy.

In his syndicated column of Nov. 26, Walter Lippman said: "In the light of this monstrous crime, we can see that in a free country, which we are and intend to be, unrestrained speech and thought are inherently subversive. Democracy can be made to work only when the bounds of community are inviolate, and stronger than all the parties and factions and interests and sects." I may not be interpreting Mr. Lippman's words correctly, but on the surface, I find them very disturbing, and I would place them among those reactions to the assassination of the President that are excessive and out of balance. I regard freedom of speech as the life blood of democracy and I believe that this view is in the main stream of the American tradition from Thomas Jefferson to Earl Warren. Consequently, when any form of speech, restrained or unrestrained, temperate or intemperate, truthful or false, is labeled as subversive, a fundamental principle of our form of government has been undermined. But when someone of Mr. Lippman's stature goes so far as to label "unrestrained speech and thought" as subversive, then it is time for us to summon our capacity for disciplined reflection and reasonable analysis, and attempt to establish our political bearings.

The historian and the scholar know that it is too early to assess the Presidency of John F. Kennedy. The necessary data are not yet available; the memoirs have not been published and the archives remain closed. But these are fast-moving times, and we cannot wait upon the slow-moving enterprise of scholarship to help us find our way in the forest of problems that lie ahead. We must take stock. We must look at where we have been, try to determine where events are leading us, and then apply our effort to charting a reasonable course and building consensus around it. We cannot do this without looking at the Presidency of John F. Kennedy.

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Since his death, the late President has been frequently compared with Abraham Lincoln, and proposals have been made to give his name to a host of public institutions from high schools to the Peace Corps and Cape Canaveral. I suspect that this kind of activity is more a reaction to the horror of the way he met his death than to a sound analysis of his place in history. I cannot help feeling that the elaborateness of the funeral arrangements, from the copying of the decorations of the Lincoln funeral to the lighting of the eternal flame over the grave, created an aura of press-agentry that was not fair to the late President. He was a good President, but I think that it is too early to rank him with a Lincoln or a Washington or a Jefferson. And although comparisons like that with Lincoln may have temporary mass appeal, they may also create an unfavorable backlash when, in less emotional times, historians sit down with the documentation and try to produce a valid appraisal.

I believe that any assessment of the Presidency of John F. Kennedy must be set against the background of the major problems that confronted this nation when he took office.

Obviously, there were thousands of problems, but I would list the major ones under five general headings. Two of them are in the field of foreign affairs. The others are domestic. In my opinion, the paramount problems facing President Kennedy were those that grew out of the arms race. The second problem area had to do with the rise of revolutionary nationalism abroad. The third was related to the second, the rise of Negro militancy in its demand for equality and the rights of citizenship in America. The fourth was the challenge of unemployment. And the fifth was the growing inadequacy of our style of politics and our institutions of government.

It is my opinion that when the Kennedy Administration assumed office, it did not have a clear picture of these problems and it had no program for dealing with them. The Administration felt its way. It was pragmatic. It developed ad hoc solutions. Some of them worked well; others, like the Bay of Pigs invasion, were disasters.

If I were to list the major accomplishments of the Kennedy Administration, I would deal first with the area of foreign affairs and the arms race. Here the great triumph of the President was the re-establishment of civilian political control over the military. President Eisenhower was right; there was a military-industrial-complex. Indeed there still is, and it bears watching. But while it was nearly out of hand during the Eisenhower Administration, it was brought under firm control by President Kennedy and his brilliant Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The intemperate speech-making of the generals was curbed. Their associations with the radical right were blocked. The tendency of the military to form political alliances with the Congress was circumscribed. One need only read the fulminations of Senator Strom Thurmond to appreciate the vigor with which the President brought the military under firm control in accordance with our constitutional system. This was not easy, and it was a great triumph of the President for which he has, in my opinion, received inadequate credit and appreciation.

The second great accomplishment of President Kennedy was his rehabilitation of intellectuality. His was an administration of intellectuals--of bright young men, of "whiz kids." The President himself was bright, and although I would not regard him as a deep thinker or a man of profound vision, he was by any reasonable standard an intellectual. He acquired information and ideas from the printed word, indeed he was a voracious reader in a society whose politicians tend to get their information primarily from the less accurate and more tendentious spoken word. He surrounded himself with men of intellectual brilliance. He understood them, he could meet them on their own terms, and he earned their respect. More than that, he was able to bridge the gap between the thinker and the politician, the man of ideas and the man of action. It was a rare gift, and he used it well, perhaps even better than a similarly gifted predecessor, Woodrow Wilson.

All of this was tremendously important, for in the modern world, a nation-state must employ its most brilliant minds if it is to survive the complexities of technology and rapid social and political change. Perhaps the greatest testimony to President Kennedy's accomplishment in this regard is the Fermi award which President Johnson has just awarded to Robert Oppenheimer. The decision to give this award to Oppenheimer was generated in the Kennedy Administration, and it is important because it represents the rehabilitation of a man who was primarily the victim of anti-intellectualism. Oppenheimer's disgrace was a victory for the know-nothings more than anything else. His rehabilitation is testimony to the respect which the Kennedy Administration has been able to re-establish for men of intellect. This was an important contribution, and we should all be grateful for it.

The third great accomplishment of the Kennedy Administration was the Peace Corps. There are many things wrong with the Peace Corps, and I believe that constructive criticism would benefit it greatly, but measured by any reasonable standard, I think it stands as a monument to the practical application of the finest values of our culture. It has put the best of the American spirit to work, not only as an effective instrument of our foreign policy, but as a useful servant to humanity. As one looks at the various bureaucracies of government, this one seems to stand out as something special. It is a dynamic and exciting phenomenon. It is potentially radical and revolutionary, perhaps beyond the realization of its present leaders. It will likely stand as a monument to John F. Kennedy, long after the eternal flame over his grave has ceased to be a tourist attraction.

And finally, and this may turn out to be the most important, there was the movement toward détente with the Soviet Union, symbolized by the nuclear test ban agreement. It was not an easy thing to try to turn away from the cold war and toward a peaceful settlement of our conflict with the Communist bloc. And even today, the policy is not being implemented with all the resources at our disposal. But it is a beginning, a watershed, and if we somehow escape the scourge of World War III, we may look back and say that we did it during the Administration of John F. Kennedy. If history makes that judgment, then the Kennedy Presidency will be ranked among the greatest.

These seem to me to be the major accomplishments of the Kennedy Presidency. I realize there are other things that could be mentioned—the trade bill has been frequently cited by others. Perhaps this will prove important in the future. To me at this moment it does not seem to be so. Others have also mentioned his confrontation with the Soviet Union during the Cuban crisis. I think it would be kinder to Mr. Kennedy to forget this, for the fact that it occurred at all was due to the complete failure of his diplomacy and his policy toward the Sino-Soviet bloc.

One should not be harsh in listing the failures of the Kennedy Administration, for the late President was in office less than three years and he inherited a staggering number of difficulties. Moreover, he may have had a long-range strategy in mind. We must remember that he was elected by a narrow margin in 1960, and he did not receive a majority of the popular vote for all candidates. His strategy may have been to use the first term to build support and organize his machinery of government, so that during his second term he could launch a major assault on the problems which he did not cope with in his first. If that was his strategy, we will probably learn the details when his colleagues begin publishing their memoirs. In any case, the assassin's bullet made its implementation impossible, and we must evaluate what actually was done, rather than what might have been done after 1964.

I think any reasonable analysis of the past two and a half years must conclude that the Kennedy Administration failed to develop a sensible policy toward the rising tide of revolutionary nationalism that is so prevalent in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Cuba was the greatest failure. President Kennedy accepted the policy of the Eisenhower Administration without questioning the platitudes or the faulty information on which it

was based. It labeled an authentic nationalist revolution as Communist and then proceeded to force it into an alliance with Communism that it regarded as terminable only by force and violence. It failed to employ the logic it uses in Yugoslavia to the problems of the Caribbean, and it did so, I believe, primarily out of fear of the domestic political consequences. For similar reasons, President Kennedy was unable to cope with South Vietnam, and incapable of doing anything about our policy toward China. There was a brief attempt to do something intelligent about British Guiana, but once again the Administration yielded to rightist pressure, and this policy was abandoned. In short, the Kennedy Administration was unable to help the American people understand or develop an intelligent policy toward revolution, and it left them, much as it found them after eight years of the Eisenhower Administration, confused and stumbling toward disaster.

I believe that President Kennedy also failed to give real leadership on the question of civil rights, and particularly the relation of this problem with the political education of the American people. The office of the Presidency was not used sufficiently to educate the American people to the moral and legal issues involved in the Negroes' struggle for equal rights. The President did not act until the events of Birmingham forced him to. Then he moved in a halting and hesitant way. Compare the speeches made by Nelson Rockefeller during his tour of the Southern states last month, and those of President Kennedy during his fateful journey. Rockefeller spoke out forcefully on the moral issues. Kennedy did not.

And the result of this failure of Presidential leadership was a decline in respect for the law and the authority of the federal government. When the people who throw the bombs in Birmingham are not found nor even vigorously sought, when the assassin of Medgar Evers appears to have escaped punishment, when peaceful demonstrations result in beatings and torture for those law-abiding citizens who participate in them, then the fabric of society is seriously torn, and no man is safe, not even the President of the United States.

Much of the blame for this situation must be placed on the Democratic party and the domination of the Congress by the most reactionary element of that party. But it was a great failure of the President that he decided to appease that reactionary element rather than fight it. It was probably the most fateful decision of his career. Not only did it prevent him from doing anything meaningful about the civil-rights problem, but it also precluded any adequate solutions to the problems of the domestic economy. Whereas the President started out with a fairly reasonable tax bill, what he ended up with was a rich man's bill. It favors the special interests, and will be of little help in solving the desperate problem of unemployment. If this bill is now passed, it is not likely to do credit to Mr. Kennedy's memory.

But when we add up all the pluses and minuses and put the Kennedy Presidency in the perspective of history, the pluses are stronger. It was a good Administration. It may not have been adequate to the challenge of the times, but it was better than any Administration we have produced since World War II. It might have become really great; we shall never know.

Now we must look at the future, and the future, as always in politics, is uncertain. Lyndon Johnson has been a conservative, in my opinion--not in the distorted sense of the word as it is currently used to describe Senator Goldwater, but in the good, Burkean sense. His career as majority leader of the Senate was not a model of liberalism. But Johnson's earlier career was liberal. When he was elected to Congress in 1937 it was as a New Dealer who supported the full Roosevelt program. In the House of Representatives, Lyndon Johnson remained a stalwart New Dealer. He supported TVA, REA, welfare legislation, and conservation measures. He opposed the special interests, including the oil interests, so powerful in his home state. He even voted against the appropriation for the House UnAmerican Activities Committee in 1946.

The Presidency can work strange chemistry on a man and can render invalid all predictions about his behavior. Johnson could be the man who refused to fight Sen. Joseph McCarthy, or he could revert to his earlier liberalism. Prudent men, therefore, will wait and watch. But this should not prevent us from taking hope in small signs, and I regard the President's message to Congress and his Thanksgiving Day speech as solid liberal documents. Let us hope that they are a portent of a progressive era to come, and that this great nation once again will find the means to cope with its problems, and set an example to mankind in liberty, law, and the brotherhood of man.