

Heart of the People Now With President

By ERIC SEVARIED

What was John F. Kennedy? How will he stand in history? As this is written, hours after his death, it is hard even to assemble thoughts, easy to misjudge such a complicated human being.

The first thing about him was his driving intelligence. His mind was always on fire; his reading was prodigious; his memory almost total recall of facts and quotations.

A friend of mine once crossed the Atlantic on a liner with the Kennedy family, years ago. She remembered the day 12-year-old Jack was ill in his stateroom; there lay the thin, freckled little boy — 12 years old, and reading Churchill's early life, other books scattered about his bed.

His was a directed intelligence; he did not waste his energies; he always seemed to know where he was going and he put first things first.

John Kennedy's intellectuality was perhaps the hallmark of his nature, even more than his youth; the thing that made him

different from so many presidents.

But few thought of him as an intellectual in the sense of one seeking truth for its own sake; he sought it, in order to act upon it. He was that rare and precious combination, the man of contemplation as well as the man of action.

He had a sharp sense of history from his immense reading, and was acutely conscious of what his own place in history might be. In a sense, he lived for that; much of his personal correspondence as president suggested his awareness that those letters would be part of the American archives and story for all time.

He brought a new style into government; he surrounded himself with intellectuals, as did Franklin Roosevelt in his first years; but in his personal style he was more like President Theodore Roosevelt.

Like the first Roosevelt, President Kennedy believed in action; he had no patience with those who were tired or skeptical or cynical; no patience with those who could not keep up, mentally or physically.

He became, with his young and beautiful wife, the symbol of America as he and most of us like to think of America: itself young, itself always hopeful, believing, and believing that government could change the face of our land and our lives and that America could do more than any country in the world to change the face and the nature of the world itself.

He showed no signs, even after three years in office, of growing tired, either in body or spirit . . . but the built-in obstacles to practical achievement were — and remain — prodigious and complex.

He began some new practical

courses of government action— as with the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress; these, perhaps, were more imaginative than his domestic conceptions; in any case, it is in the domestic field that his difficulties were the greatest and progress the slowest.

Early on, he showed that his way would be to try to conciliate and persuade the Congress, and to compromise with it where he had to, rather than to try bulldozer tactics. Of his bold actions, his nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union over Cuba was the boldest, one of the boldest and most successful acts of statesmanship the history books will ever tell the future about.

But at bottom, President Kennedy was a cautious, prudent man. He liked to have all his ducks in a row before he fired. However vibrant in his political behavior, he was, in his deepest emotional nature, a conservative human being.

Rarely, did the people become aware of his deep feelings about anything. When he spoke to the country by radio or television, his head usually ruled his heart. Only in very special circumstances, as on the day of brutal events in Mississippi, did passion rise in his voice as he spoke.

This is why some professional observers said that President Kennedy had opened his mind to us, but not his heart . . . that therefore, politically, he had not captured the heart of the people.

If that was so, it is so no longer; the heart of the people is with the young President in death; with all of his family.

The tears of the country are with them; its hopes are with the new President.

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