

Reflections On J.F.K. Era

by John K. Elliott,
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What would the late President Kennedy have thought had he been able to hear the eulogies of the last few days? No doubt he would have derived an ironic enjoyment from the rapid turnabout in the way people talked about the president from the days just before the fatal trip to Dallas to those immediately following it.

For from friend and foe alike there had been intimations that the "vigha" which marked the early days of the New Frontier was ebbing. The regime which set out to accomplish so much so soon was running out of steam. Congress had slipped back to its traditional dead centre.

And it might not be without significance that the best selling non-fiction book in the United States was one which even critics not generally favorable to the president tagged as a hatchet job on Mr. Kennedy.

It has been the lot of all the presidents of the United States who actually worked to achieve positive ends to make enemies. Washington and Lincoln, both firmly placed by history in the highest ranks of the presidents, faced bitter enmity. Sometimes it seems that the worst presidents had the fewest outspoken enemies.

A good many of us can still recall the bitterness with

which Franklin Delano Roosevelt was assailed, and could recognize echoes of it in what was said about Kennedy.

But even with all that, it was admitted that Kennedy was an odds-on favorite to succeed himself in the 1964 election, though to some it appeared that Senator Barry Goldwater was shortening the odds.

What had happened was that Kennedy, in trying to live up to the challenge of his high office, ran head-on into what Prof. James MacGregor Burns called the deadlock of democracy, the constitutional system of checks and balances which was designed to prevent the emergence of a tyrant and which has functioned to curtail the authority of a leader.

Although John F. Kennedy was cut down before he had been able to finish a single term in office, he had already demonstrated high qualities. He brought to the presidency intellect, eloquence and great personal charm. He also brought a cold ruthlessness and a sharp sense of political realism. He believed that the system of checks and balances embodied in the constitution could work under a strong President, and he tried his hardest to fill that role.

As Prof. Burns put it "The new President revived the traditional methods of presidential power. He went before Congress to propose major

legislation. He made full use of radio, television, White House conferences, presidential advisory commissions, special assistants, in framing and publicizing his program. His legislative aides used all the time honored methods of 'blarney, bludgeon and boodle', as Helen Fuller put it, in wielding influence on Capitol Hill.

"Kennedy met regularly with the legislative leaders, followed the course of bills carefully, intervened quickly with individual legislators, invited congressmen to receptions by groups, and had his aides pay close attention to their specific needs, whether a project back home or a special tour of the White House for a constituent."

The tremendous power of his office, which he obviously loved, he used to the full. But he found it strangely limited, as his great predecessors did. In part the limitation came from circumstances. In foreign affairs he found that he had to consider not merely his own policies, but their effects on his allies. At home the stubborn resistance of the South to the civil rights movement spread out to sabotage his tax cut and other policies. At one stage he complained that the best the President could do was choose between blunders.

His greatest achievements and his most humiliating defeats came in the field of foreign policy. The Bay of

Pigs adventure in Cuba, where he was confronted by a situation he had not the experience nor the confidence to alter, was a failure he never forgot.

But was balanced by his handling of the Cuban challenge in October, 1962 when the world came closer to the brink of war than at any time since 1945. While his handling of the situation was criticized from many angles the facts remain that war averted and that the Russians never challenged the West so openly again.

It was after this crisis that the agreement was made on the nuclear test ban, the only substantial agreement reached between the major power blocs in the post-war period. Even the monolithic Communist grouping began to show its split more openly after the Cuban fiasco.

Kennedy himself did not find it easy to keep the Western alliance intact. Sometimes he was a bit brusque with leaders of other lands, although in general his personal relationships were cordial. However a friendly meeting with President de Gaulle failed to stop the French leader from going his own way.

Chancellor Adenauer was constantly in fear that Kennedy's efforts to relieve the tension between Russia and the West would mean concessions at the expense of Germany. Even Harold Macmillan, who consistently backed Kennedy's policies and shared his desire to foster better relations with Russia, found himself seriously embarrassed when the U.S. unceremoniously dropped the Skybolt, which Britain regarded as a joint effort. Canadians do not need to be reminded of the various frictions which developed between the Kennedy regime and successive Canadian administrations.

At home, the great fact of his presidency was the crystallization of the Negro demand for equal rights "now". Accumulated frustrations of the century since slavery officially ended came to head. Kennedy did no more than a responsible leader was bound to do.

But on his head and that of his brother, the attorney-general, was poured a searing blast of Southern discomfort. As the consequences of the civil rights movement were felt in the North, the President's power in the great industrial centres was seriously weakened.

One of his great achievements was administrative. It was the attempt to bring the virtually autonomous armed service departments under the effective control of Secretary Robert McNamara. Although it also sparked bitterness, it was more successful than earlier efforts by other presidents had been.

Near the last he tried to persuade the industrial and financial leaders of the country that he was not "anti-business," but it could scarcely be called a success. By many he was regarded, like Roosevelt, as a traitor to his class. And his blast against the steel industry for raising prices after securing a moderate labor settlement was neither forgotten nor forgiven, probably because it was at least temporarily successful.

His efforts on behalf of health and education were largely bogged down in Congressional deadlock. But he did at least bring these matters before the public and drew full attention to them.

Never since the days of F.D.R.'s Brain Trust were so many academic types lured to Washington. For a time, at least, eggheads became fashionable if not respectable. The experiment was not an unqualified success, but it may have proved educational — if only to the educators involved.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was human — a fact sometimes overlooked by both his enthusiastic supporters and his enemies. Neither he nor any of his predecessors in the presidency were able to realize the hopes held by and for them. He did not attain all his goals, but none of his numerous enemies would contend that he ever failed to strive for them with all courage and vigor. And one positive achievement cannot be denied. He disposed of the religious bar which had hitherto kept any member of his faith from the White House.

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