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JFK

Our parents know where they were the day John F. Kennedy was killed. Some of us weren't even born yet. Yet 20 years after his death, many students pretend to know JFK the man, JFK the best president ever. What they know is JFK the myth. Even our parents have problems separating reality from emotion. Kennedy barely won the 1960 presidential race, but a few years after his death, more than 70 percent of those polled said they'd voted for him. Something had changed their minds. A shot was fired Nov. 22, 1963, and a president was canonized.

The presidency of Kennedy and what he was supposed to mean for the American people have been analyzed again and again. At first he was a saint. Then he was a philanderer with a great personality. Supposedly, the new wave of critiques would blend those two polar views and put Kennedy in the "right perspective."

This assumption is probably worthless. Our country is still having a love affair with Camelot, and that is the reason why both a freshman and his father can speak eloquently about a man who was in office for less than three years. Some quality or image has transcended generations to make Kennedy America's most loved president since George Washington.

Historians and political scientists have explained the emotion by saying Kennedy may have been more intellectually qualified for the job than anyone else elected in this century. He treated each policy with a flexible and pragmatic — if usually cautious — approach. But most of all he was young but wise, tender but forceful. Youth had supplanted the old men tottering through the White House, and the country cheered the change. Hope and pride and the "American Dream" had been revived, and with them, the promise of a new social order, one of legal equality and economic opportunity. America was getting what it had always wanted, its own brand of royalty.

But John Kennedy never matched the expectations set for him, whether they were established before or after his death. Like any other president, he found many tasks beyond him. Underneath his decisive outward personality were the same fear and hesitation of any president. America slipped into the Vietnam War partly because Kennedy could not act on his private convictions to stay out of Southeast Asia. His "cautious" drive toward civil rights could never have yielded the reforms of Johnson's Great Society, even though most of the reform concepts were his own. The Bay of Pigs fiasco was the direct result of his inexperience in dealing with military and intelligence advisers, an inexperience which allowed him to be drawn into the Eisenhower-engineered disaster. Kennedy made his share of mistakes.

Probably his most visible and lasting accomplishment was the establishment of the Peace Corps, the living tribute that emobodies humanitarian ideals carried forward by the youthful spirit of all ages.

It is for this zest and level-headed practicality that we mourn today. It is the man, not the policies, that we admire. We cannot forget his faults, but we can hold on to his ideals. And it is his youth — the youth our parents felt 20 years ago and the youth we cherish today — that binds our generations together and makes us remember John F. Kennedy.

John F. Kennedy's greatness as president has been the subject of much heated debate among historians and political scientists. His charisma — the youthful energy and optimism he radiated — unequivocally inspired many Americans, and his tragic death after only three years in office shocked the nation. These elements have long clouded historical assessment of John F. Kennedy's presidency and his effectiveness as a leader. On today's editorial page, two UNC professors write about Kennedy, his failures and achievements as president, and the legacy he left this country.

Kennedy: the rhetoric and the reality

By LOU LIPSITZ

I was not a John F. Kennedy supporter during his effort to gain the Democratic Party nomination in 1960. I felt a significant fear of the Kennedy approach. He and the people around him seemed to be obsessed with anxieties that the United States was losing out in world affairs. I sensed that they wanted to prove how "tough" they were. Rather than idealistic, they struck me as very power-oriented and more interested in the appearances of things than in the realities. I suspected that in domestic affairs, for example, they would try to play it safe, appeasing both conservatives and liberals as much as possible.

My preference that year was for Hubert Humphrey. I remember sending Humphrey a contribution at the time of the West Virginia primary — a vote that was important to Kennedy as proof that he was acceptable to Protestant voters. I resented the Kennedys "buying" that election with the sheer weight of their financial bombardment. Moreover, I felt that Humphrey had a better understanding of foreign policy and a less belligerent stance toward the rest of the world. If anything, Humphrey seemed long on compassion while Kennedy seemed to lack it.

I suppose I could sum up my annoyance with the JFK style by quoting the famous line from his inaugural address: "Think not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Really? The heavy rhetoric, the emphasis on sacrifice, the call to some sort of selfless crusade — what did all this imply? To me, it was just a stance, at that moment rather empty of real objectives other than the pervasive anti-communism of the day. It sounded like a stylish Richard Nixon.

Early events in the Kennedy years seemed to me to confirm my suspicions. Kennedy stepped up the level of official anti-communism. He founded the Green Berets. His cabinet was a strange melange of liberals and conservatives. Just to play it safe, he appointed several Republicans to his cabinet, including Dean Rusk. There were certainly better choices available. Then came the Bay of Pigs fiasco, which in one blow proved the inexperience and bad judgment of the new administration. In his first summer in office, Kennedy focused national attention on the idea of building fall-out shelters to protect against nuclear attack. But what nuclear attack? His administration had already determined that the Soviet Union was *not* ahead of the United States in intercontinental missiles. Fortunately, the shelter issue was submerged by intelligent criticism and popular skepticism.

JFK also disappointed on the matter of civil rights. His administration had to be dragged along by the civil rights movement. Though his heart may have been in the right place, his naivete was shown once again in the handling of the incident at the University of Mississippi. Federal marshals and troops were sent, but the resolve of the presidency to deal with the issues was not made clear soon enough and this invited the serious violence that took place. It appears that in this incident, Kennedy wanted to leave as much control as he could in the hands of the governor. He was far too trusting.

In many of these matters, Kennedy was a "politician" — that is, someone focused on attaining and retaining *power*. He was not one to stick his neck out too far in U.S. domestic politics. His approach was largely technical and managerial. As he put it in one of his well-known speeches, most of our problems in the United States were ones that could be handled by proper management, by an intelligent approach to issues. Conflict and emotion were apparently only things that got in the way.

Then came the Cuban Missile Crisis — that moment in our history when the world came closest to nuclear war. The handling of the crisis is generally hailed as a masterpiece of decision-making. War was avoided and the Soviets backed down. Hurrah! But was this issue worth bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war? After all, the United States had its own missiles on the borders of the Soviet Union. What if the Soviets issued a similar ultimatum? I will not attempt here to assess the complex issues involved, but I believe this crisis was itself partly of American making. I am not one of those people who thinks well of JFK because he made all of us look into the abyss. It was in typical Kennedy-esque style that Dean Rusk described the way the crisis was resolved: We were eyeball to eyeball and the other guy blinked!

And I read only this week that Kennedy's actions in 1962 could be used as justification for the recent invasion of Grenada. Indeed! Anyone who thinks *that* never needed any justification in the first place. But more important is the fact that the Kennedy approach contributed to a "militarization" of U.S. foreign policy that is perhaps reaching its peak only now.

And yet... there was *something* about those Kennedy years. What was it? Hopefulness? Was it the idea that intelligent people could turn our government in better directions? Was it a certain humor and stylishness that attracted people, especially younger people, to take politics seriously? Was it the notion that a president could be young and open to experience, that a certain daring and adventure could play a role in political life?

I admired Kennedy for his capacity to learn. He learned from the Bay of Pigs. He learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis. His speech at American University in June 1963 is one of the most thoughtful, compassionate utterances of any American president in the post-World War II period. There was the clear magnetism of the Peace Corps.

What would Kennedy have done had he lived? Would Vietnam have happened? After all, most of Lyndon B. Johnson's advisers came from the Kennedy administration. How would Kennedy have dealt with the rising protests of the '60s? Could he have identified with them? Was he the sort of president who could have grasped the meaning of popular aspirations? Had he lived, would we have dealt with China even earlier, and conducted further arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union? Would we have stopped trying to assassinate Fidel Castro? Would we have started to speak of "human rights"?

These are questions we cannot answer. When I think back on the very brief Kennedy era, I am not sure whether to measure it by the many troubling events of that time, or whether to think about it in terms of its potential, the potential that seemed to be there for growth and intelligence. Or was that an illusion which would shortly have succumbed to the iron demands of power?

It is probably a mistaken thing, in any case, to count too much on presidents. They are, we too often forget, creatures more than creators of their times.

Lou Lipsitz is a UNC professor of political science.

A view of Camelot shattered

By OTIS L. GRAHAM JR.

The university teacher now confronts young people who have no direct memory or impression of John Kennedy, and this has been so since the early or mid-1970s. I found this unsettling when first I realized — was it in 1975? — that my students had no personal feelings one way or the other about JFK, that he was now one of those lifeless figures out of the history books. How odd that seems! For virtually all of us who lived through his time had a strong personal relationship with him, whether hostile (some of my Southern uncles, for example) or friendly (all the people in my circle of acquaintance). Appraising his career in 1983, as we are prompted to do by the 20th anniversary of his assassination, begins for me in this sense of personal engagement.

I stood in a cold rain in New York for two hours to watch his motorcade pass — it must have been mid-October 1960. We were there, graduate students in our 20s, because he had caught our imagination, seemed to promise a thawing of the intellectual, moral, even aesthetic ice that had set so hard as the Eisenhower era wore on. Three years later I heard that he had been shot, and, like everyone else, I remember where I was — at Columbia, in the student lounge. I watched his casket carried over that bridge, the black horse, his widow, General DeGaulle and the others trailing behind on foot. We saw Oswald shot on television. Those were days that changed a person, melodramatic as that may sound.

We have had 20 years of distance in which to gain perspective. The first wave of writing made him out a much more consequential world figure and a more admirable president than he actually was, but these were written by friends and associates. A second wave of revisionist writing cut him down below his real size, condemning his eager enlistment in the search for victory in the Cold War, his sluggishness on civil rights, his slide toward Vietnamese intervention, his meager record of domestic change. Then came a third wave of Kennedy books, perhaps a fourth now crashes around us, the authors newly informed by the opening of some archives and many oral histories. Judgment now moves from the extremes of adulation and condemnation toward more complex and tempered portraits. Those attracted to his brains and wit find no way to avoid his flaws and errors. Yet when one is tempted by these shortcomings to be harshly critical, our expanding knowledge of the world that he tried to change forces much sympathy for how even presidents are overmatched by their assignment.

Kennedy will never rank among the great presidents, if only because he served so briefly and during no extended national crisis. Yet some would shrink the significance of his presidency even further, as it becomes clear how conventional — if quick — was his mind, how much of his energy was devoted to womanizing, how cloudy was his moral compass on civil rights or Vietnam. But I am sure that this belittling will continue to be unpersuasive, that his niche will be larger than his time at work. There are several reasons why he will seem a large and compelling figure long after those of us prejudiced by memories have moved on.

The first is the appeal of his potential, what some have called "the Kennedy promise." On the fundamental issues of nuclear war and civil rights, his early conventional views were to be shaken by events — Cuba, Birmingham. In the American University speech of June 1963, and in the national address on civil rights of the same week, we see John Kennedy unmistakably stepping out upon new moral ground and becoming a much larger and more potent figure (as his brother Robert would do between 1963 and 1968). He was trying to re-think the commitment in Vietnam; he had ordered staff work done on a poverty program, on what we might learn from French planning. Americans who now observe a president who started work at age 69 and who never changes his mind about anything will appreciate the memory of a chief executive in his early 40s who was open to intellectual and moral growth.

And Kennedy has been fortunate in his successors, only the first of them being in any way his responsibility. Whatever his occasional coarseness of manner, whatever the gap between the brilliant style and the way his mind actually worked, Kennedy's gifts have not been remotely matched by any who followed him in that office. After him, the cynical manipulation, the moral insensitivity, the macho reflexes, the banality of phrase and thought that had only been small parts of his personality became central characteristics of presidential lineage (but for Jimmy Carter, whose failings were of a different sort). Kennedy has yet to be followed by anyone with his combined power of mind, communication, inner security and ability to attract superb people into public service.

Because of these gifts, and because they led to much less social change — so little of a New Frontier — that even his short time should plausibly have produced, his presidency will remain fascinating for dispaying the earliest signs of the institutional weakness of the postwar presidency. Truman's quagmires could be laid to his own mediocrity, and Eisenhower's limited agenda and "hidden-hand" strategy concealed the structural weakness of the presidential office within the American system. But the liberal activists to follow, Kennedy and Johnson, opened to full gaze a set of flaws in our polity, especially in our presidency. Serious history will remain interested in this issue, quite apart from the drama of those turbulent days and the singular personalities who led the nation through them.

Humanity does not know exactly what leadership is, but, unlike pornography, we know it best when we do not see it. Since Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were cut down in 1968, we have painfully lacked national figures who could lay plausible claim to offering moral and institutional reorientation to a society foundering in a trough between eras. Whatever leadership consists of, it is hard to deny that John Kennedy had a large supply of its qualities. He communicated a sense of command, of social invigoration and change. He brushed aside the Eisenhower era, unleashed energies and seemed able — at least he was determined — to guide them. His vision of where we ought to go was ill-formed and even confused behind the impressive presence. He was working on this, with results we cannot know, when the ugly part of our society offered one of its many reminders that America has violence in her blood, and life is not Camelot.

Otis L. Graham Jr. is a UNC distinguished professor of history.