The Kennedy Myth and American Politics

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When Lyndon Johnson began his presidency with the words "Let us continue," his meaning was clear. The idea of America had acquired another shrine. JFK was the apostle of racial and religious equality, compassion toward the underprivileged, and a champion of democracy. Johnson went on to exploit that sentiment by engineering the enactment of key elements of his Great Society legislation. The most significant, civil rights, was hailed as a memorial to Kennedy. The fallen president became transformed in memory as a fighter for the common man.

Trading on that, and utilizing his own considerable skills, President Johnson acted during a time of economic well-being, in contrast to his political "daddy," F.D.R., to create his own distinctive revolution. Before the end of 1966, however, the momentum was almost dead, destroyed by the politics of backlash.

The shape of American politics during the years that followed drew more from a variety of other factors, both domestic and international. The New Frontier became invisible. Kennedy was less an architect of the future than a player at the leading edge of change. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to note that the harshest critics of John F. Kennedy have conceded the place of inspiration as his chief legacy. So sharp a writer as
Henry Fairlie has, in fact, charged him with orchestrating “the politics of expectation.”

Skepticism about Kennedy was hardly new. Eric Sevareid wrote in 1959 that “Kennedy’s candidacy for the nomination” would be a test “of the charm-school theory of high politics,” and Fletcher Knebel declared that “Kennedy’s political success is based on two foundations—shrewd planning and votes.” One Kennedy senatorial colleague, Pat McNamara of Michigan, told Drew Pearson, “As between Kennedy and Nixon if they both were running for President, I would have a hard time making up my mind who to vote for.” Political scientist James MacGregor Burns, while working on his campaign biography, jeopardized his relationship with the Kennedyites by daring to raise questions about the young man’s commitment to anything other than his own ambitions. The critics were invariably Democrats and liberals. They also shared doubts about the ideological commitment of a son of Joseph Patrick Kennedy and a friend of Joe McCarthy.

Ted Sorensen has agreed that Jack Kennedy “never identified himself as a liberal; it was only after his death,” Sorensen added, “that they began to claim him as one of theirs.” In fact, Sorensen went on to say, in an interview that took place during the first Reagan term, “on fiscal matters he was more conservative than any president we’ve had since.” If, as has been so widely suggested, Kennedy’s liberalism was two-thirds mythology, concocted to suit the tastes of his potential Democratic backers, and only some one-third the product of enlightened progressivism—and if that tepid commitment was held inadequate for the “common good” in a nation besotted by Eisenhower shibboleths—how much does that still leave Kennedy responsible for what happened after his death?

How much was he responsible, in other words, for the Quixotic effort to subdue Indochina, for the unleashing of domestic economic and racial animosities that smoldered in decaying inner cities, for the counter-culture and the counter-counter culture—the revenge of the “forgotten Americans,” and the rise of a new conservative majority?

How much was due to the Kennedy mythology? Had he been given more years, how would he have altered future history? Would middle class America have been less determined to safeguard their homes, jobs, and pocketbooks from the menacing poor?

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Most Americans thought that Dallas marked a sudden end of stability. Kennedy’s years became an interlude between Eisenhower tranquillity and Johnson-Nixon turmoil. A Gallup survey in 1983 reported that 65 percent of those canvassed believed that the United States would have been
“much different” if Kennedy had not been killed. If only he had lived, went the argument, the storm would not have come. Vietnam would not have become an American trap, there would not have been fires in the streets, and the presidency would have remained untarnished by scandal and bitterness.

Certain points about the Kennedy impact, however, can be made with confidence:

It is true that there was no social and economic transformation. The distribution of income, the extremes of wealth and poverty, were essentially untouched. But it is also true that, despite current tensions in parts of the country, the Jim Crow that lived on until the 1960s belongs to the past.

Kennedy—and the Johnson succession—closed out the New and Fair Deal reform movement. The upheavals of the post-Kennedy ’60s and early ’70s precipitated a combination of social backlash and inflation. Any future administration devoted to reforms will be compelled to devise a new blueprint.

If certain of our current leaders are “no Jack Kennedys,” it should be remembered that neither is the U.S. of 1989 the U.S. of the early 1960s. The Kennedy luster profited not only from its own style but, to a considerable degree, from the relative drabness and inertia of the Eisenhower fifties. Kennedy said he spoke for a new generation, and he seemed plausible in that role. Under his leadership, the national purpose sent a message of clear pragmatic idealism—one filled with such high-minded notions as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress—that inspired a new generation of Americans. Our actions began to fall into line with our propaganda.

The Kennedy image drew added strength from the timely marriage of technology and nature. The contrast of Jack and Jackie with Ike and Mamie was striking, especially in a world not yet accustomed to saturated television coverage. Eisenhower, it is commonly assumed, retained sufficient popularity at the end of his second term to have been able to win another. Kennedy, however, having pulled off his razor-thin victory over Nixon, was quickly hailed as the herald of a new generation, a point he himself encouraged in his Inaugural Address. A nonideological nation succumbed to attractions that were more regal than philosophical. For the next 1,037 days, the American people were treated to more of the same. The Kennedys, with Caroline and her little brother, became the royal family.
Richard Goodwin has noted that Kennedy’s 1960 campaign began the process of speeding up the “terminal decay” of the Democratic Party. If that party was being reshaped, so was the strength of partisan loyalties. With the help of the newer electronic media, and with a further boost from older government entitlement programs, the influence of local political leaders was gradually weakening. Kennedy, in the 1960 campaign, relied on his own cadre that was independent of the Democratic National Committee. Lyndon Johnson neglected the DNC even more. By 1971, David Broder would write a book called *The Party’s Over*. The post-McGovern, post-Watergate election in 1974 brought into positions of power a new group of bright Democrats, such people as Michael Dukakis, Les AuCoin, Toby Moffett, and Paul Tsongas. Perhaps most closely identified with the Kennedy style was Gary Hart, especially in the 1984 campaign.

They and others—James Florio, Bill Bradley, Richard Gephardt, Timothy Wirth, Bruce Babbitt, Albert Gore, Jr., Jim Hunt, Christopher Dodd—and a number of journalists—especially Charles Peters and the staff of *The Washington Monthly*, as well as academics, became the “cool pragmatists” (or “bloodless progressives”) of a new political wave. Speaking in the wake of Reagan’s 1980 victory, Morton Kondracke of *The New Republic* declared that “what the Democratic Party has to do is adopt some sort of a—what might be called a neoliberal ideology.” Pressed by a startled Jim Lehrer on his PBS television program for exactly what that meant, Kondracke went on to explain that it was “an attempt to combine the traditional Democratic compassion for the downtrodden and outcast elements of society with different vehicles than categorical aid programs or quota systems or new federal bureaucracies.” More privately, over a year earlier, editor Peters, loosened by alcohol, shouted in glee at *The Washington Monthly*’s tenth anniversary party, “We are the neoliberals.” They were liberal but called for no crusades. As political scientist William Schneider has written, “A new kind of liberal emerged out of this context: unorthodox, reform-minded, iconoclastic, and staunchly independent of Democratic Party tradition.” Many regarded them as a break from the old dominant New Deal liberalism.

They were, in short, Kennedy’s children. Several, including Peters as well as Christopher Dodd and Paul Tsongas, had served with the Peace Corps. They followed their symbolic leader in the disavowal of ideological rigidity. Randall Rothenberg, in his *Esquire* article of February 1982 that introduced the world to neoliberalism, stated, “What’s more important is that many of these younger Democrats have consciously modeled
their political presence on JFK’s vision.” He then quoted Gary Hart as saying, “I believe that John Kennedy was a bridge from Roosevelt and Truman and the New Deal to something beyond. If you rounded us all up and asked, ‘Why did you get into politics?’ nine out of ten would say John Kennedy.”12 Hart, George McGovern’s former campaign manager in an earlier life, stood out as neoliberalism’s most prominent proponent. Along with the others, his economics advocated growth combined with industrial planning policies together with vigorous support for federal aid to education.13

Hart, of course, failed to win his party’s presidential nomination in 1984; four years later, his personal behavior (another Kennedyesque pattern) crippled a second attempt. Michael Dukakis, of course, embarrassed himself after he got the nomination. The Bush victory appeared to have rendered neoliberalism one of the briefest movements in American politics. Critics had already seen the idea as a corruption of liberalism. Sidney Blumenthal thought it was “Carterism without Carter.” Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a loyal New Frontiersman, came close to denouncing it as “Reaganism without Reagan.” Neoliberalism, he wrote, was “a politically futile course for the Democratic Party.... Far from rejecting the Reagan frameworks, they would at most rejigger priorities here and there.”14

It was fitting that Kennedyites should differ about the Kennedy legacy. Much clearer is the establishment of the Kennedy image at the heart of American nationalism. His name has been invoked by such conservatives as Ronald Reagan, Jack Kemp, Richard Nixon, and Jeanne Kirkpatrick.15 In the New York City mayoralty election of 1989, the fight was between a Republican who had been a Kennedy admirer and worker in his youth, Rudolph Giuliani, and David Dinkins, who used the Kennedy name to assure potential voters of his political purity.16 Senator Charles S. Robb of Virginia, speaking to the Democratic Leadership Council, advised the rejection by the party of “ideological litmus tests and programmatic rigidity of what some have called ‘liberal fundamentalism.’” Calling for a broader, more inclusive liberalism, he made clear that he meant a return to the “forward-looking liberalism” of the New Frontier.17 His words echoed neoliberal themes.

Neoliberals, sometimes known as “Atari Democrats,” high-tech types emphasizing the new technology, voiced both the strengths and weaknesses of the combination of idealism and pragmatism, an attractive credo to all who identified with the Kennedy legacy.

Take, for example, education, a subject about as dear to the heart of the Ataris as economic growth and technology. Their emphasis was on fulfilling the American dream and preparing young people for the coming
high technology order. Peters, in his “neoliberal manifesto” of 1983, declared that their concern with the public school system was “at once pragmatic and idealistic.”

Theodore Sorensen has agreed that education was “the one domestic subject that mattered most to John Kennedy....,” a position that can be easily confirmed by examining his entire political career. Kennedy’s commitment was most often justified by America’s Cold War needs. The National Defense Education Act that followed the Soviet launching of Sputnik was the prime example. Partly as a form of political atonement for his silence about Joe McCarthy, Kennedy became a vigorous advocate of repealing the loyalty oath required of graduate students attempting to qualify for federal funds. Or, as with the position taken by President George Bush in Charlottesville, Virginia, last September, when meeting with governors on the need to overhaul the nation’s school system, the importance of international commerce was the compelling rationale. Kennedy often stressed both factors, but he also argued for improved education for the benefit of individuals and the society, especially in a democracy.

As president, his resistance to private school aid was as much of an obstacle as his earlier support, especially when the Rules Committee narrowly defeated his public school education bill in 1961. Kennedy followed that loss with the statement that he considered “it to be the most important piece of domestic legislation.” Indeed, his aid to higher education bill of 1963, where assistance to private schools was not a factor, was notable as the first major aid to education proposal that did not carry the defense needs of the cold war as its justification. “No number of setbacks discouraged him,” Sorensen reports. “When an omnibus bill failed, he tried for each of its parts, and vice versa. When elementary and secondary school aid was blocked, he worked on higher education.”

At the end, the administration’s Higher Education Facilities Act was still pending. Aid to education became a more legitimate part of the Kennedy legacy than civil rights—not only in the formal sense but through such programs as the Peace Corps and its domestic imitation, VISTA, as well as through desegregation and the antipoverty program that began to take shape during his final months. Concern for early childhood education was the mission of the administration’s Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, which had the close involvement of Robert Kennedy and spawned other programs, most notably such grass-roots efforts as Haryou and Mobilization for Youth. Lyndon Johnson, in his mournful first speech to the joint session of Congress of November 27, 1963, that called for the enactment of Kennedy’s program urged passage of “the pending
education bills to help bring the light of learning to every home and hamlet in America.”

The legislation was signed into law one week before Christmas, with a fulsome tribute by Johnson to his predecessor for having made it possible. Francis Keppel, who was appointed Commissioner of Education by Kennedy in November of 1962, later told an interviewer that the President had been particularly persuasive on the higher levels of education. “He had an effect simply because he lived and breathed intellectual matters. ... He just represented that whole generation and this devotion touched me about it. He caught that generation. ... The tone was set for it.”

Johnson then went on to the enactment, as part of his Great Society program, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Guided along by Keppel, it contained provisions for aid to private schools, including sectarian institutions. That question had been one of the major obstacles to federal assistance during the entire post-World War II period. The Kennedy-Johnson period did much to keep education on the agenda. More recently, a half dozen years before George Bush declared himself “the education President,” alarming reports about the state of the nation’s educational system went unheeded. That was true despite the publicity given to the A Nation at Risk report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Recently, Japanese officials advised Americans to upgrade their schools if they wanted to be competitive in international commerce. Meanwhile, two decades after the Kennedy-Johnson period, the nation’s schools continued to decline.

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We should also argue that Kennedy altered the presidency itself. Not since FDR’s time had the Executive Branch cast such an intimidating shadow. Successors had to cope with the standards set by Kennedy—his rhetoric, his sparkling press conferences, the attractiveness of the First Family, his sense of style, his efforts to set the tone for American culture.

Kennedy made the public feel good about the man in the White House, thanks in large part to his ability as an image-maker. In 1983, Gallup reported that he was by far the favorite former president, three times as much as the man who placed second, FDR. In 1988, New York Times correspondent Michael T. Kaufman wrote that interest in JFK “is surging, and not only because the anniversary of his death falls this week ... For many now in middle age,” he added, “including those ascending to positions of power, basic political reflexes were established in the early 1960’s.”

How all this can be separated from the horror at Dallas is beyond understanding, so it will be a trick to step back from that event and find the
man who was at the center of "Camelot." One week before Kennedy went to Texas, James Reston devoted his newspaper column to the state of the presidency. "One has the distinct impression that the American people are going to reelect him, probably by a wide margin," he wrote, "but don't quite believe him." Then, in words that were rendered ironic by the assassination, he added, "He has touched the intellect of the country but not the heart. He has informed but not inspired the nation." Reston concluded with the observation that "he has not made the people feel as he feels, or lifted them beyond their private purposes to one of the larger purposes he has in mind... this is a far cry from the atmosphere he promised when he ran for the Presidency in 1960." 32 A New Frontiersman, Richard Goodwin, has recently written that "No one ever really knew John Kennedy." 33

Nevertheless, it should be added, we all think we do, which gives the legend the strength of universality.

Notes

6. Ibid., p. 64.
32. Ibid., November 15, 1963.