

worldview

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John F. Kennedy has been taken from us; there is an aching emptiness where there was once a bright presence. We are left now to assess his accomplishments and to meditate on the meaning of his death and the almost universal grief it inspired.

The first news of President Kennedy's death struck with such force that it was impossible immediately to acknowledge its impact. Frantic disbelief sought vainly to postpone the full realization that an assassin's bullet had deprived the world's strongest nation of its leader, that the President we knew as a powerful, intensely alive young man was dead. And that realization, when it came, brought with it a pain that was both sharp and penetrating, dull and lingering, a pain that was personal and collective.

And it brought the further realization that, immortality upon him, the President was now the possession of his fellow citizens. There would be nothing now to change the record of his days on earth—no further accomplishments, no additional failures and defeats, none of the vigorous campaigning he seemed to anticipate with pleasure, no more of the wit and charm and elegance and cool reason that contributed to his much vaunted style. This man, who was so conscious of the judgment of history, would be judged on the record he established in less than three years as President. On that record and a general feeling for the man and his aspirations. For John Kennedy's life was the kind of which legends are made, and already the myth-making powers are at work.

President Kennedy's most notable achievement was his leadership of the Western alliance. However great the responsibilities of other Western leaders, however eager they seemed to bear the burdens and set the directions, no one doubted that as the world is now organized the heaviest burden, the gravest responsibility, fell on the shoulders of the youngest world leader. It was Kennedy who was on this end of the hot line.

His youth and relative inexperience told against him in his initial encounters with Khrushchev, de Gaulle and others and were undoubted factors in the *grotesquerie* of the Bay of Pigs. But the decisiveness, the firmness, the restraint that he later showed, during the Cuban blockade for example, confirmed that he had the stature appropriate to the President of the United States. The subsequent test-ban treaty was, as he said, the first small step out of a darkness, a step toward a more rational method of negotiating differences in a nuclear age. It gave promise of further steps that might, with appropriate safeguards, be taken in the future. The pattern of behavior that was emerging here was present in his handling of other areas of foreign policy.

His domestic program is even more difficult to assess because it was, at the moment of his death, bogged down in a Congress divided against itself and against strong Executive pressures. One's presuppositions, hopes and prejudices will probably decide how one judges the likely outcome of his domestic policies had he lived to fight them through. What he has left are some few resounding successes, such as the Peace Corps, and many eloquent, firm statements of political goals that will not soon be eroded by the passage of time.

But the evaluation of President Kennedy's record, even if carried out with sensitive discrimination and in detail, would not wholly account for the response his death drew from people around the world, for the numbers of young people who streamed into Washington and even now continue to file by his grave. It is not simply the incomplete record or the office of the Presidency that allowed this man, who in life was so frequently judged to be cool and calculating, to evoke in death such a deep, warm and spontaneous reaction.

John Kennedy's death was as a lightning flash