

The Kennedy Mystery: A Legacy Overshadowed

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Some have used the phrase, “The greatest man since Jesus Christ” (Reeves, 2017, para. 2). Others have colloquially referred to him as Jack, and the country bestowed upon him one of the most highly sought-after titles in the United States. President John F. Kennedy has served in a variety of roles and under numerous titles. Yet all that we generally remember is his name, his tragic assassination, and that he is regarded as one of the best presidents of modern times. What we often forget, or never understood in the first place, is the mystery of the Kennedy legacy. And why it is so clearly etched in both our minds and history itself. To understand his legacy, we must first know his story, and to know his story we must start at the very beginning.

As Manchester (2020) writes in his biography in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, John F. Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917, in Brookline, Massachusetts, to Joseph and Rose Kennedy. Manchester (2020) goes on to discuss how JFK is a straight white male of the Roman Catholic faith. He enjoyed a wealthy, elite lifestyle where he was “the second of nine children” and “reared in a family that demanded intense physical and intellectual competition among the siblings...” (para. 1). Each and every Kennedy child was expected to achieve great things, and they were provided the educational tools necessary to meet such high expectations. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Staff (2020) elaborates on these academic opportunities, noting how, as a child, John attended boarding school at Choate Rosemary Hall. Kennedy subsequently began college at Harvard in 1936, and served afterwards in the Navy during World War II as a lieutenant aboard a patrol torpedo boat near Japan. Building upon these educational pursuits and moving on to his professional accomplishments, Manchester (2020) provides a list of numerous achievements throughout Kennedy’s life. These include receiving the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for leadership and courage, winning multiple congressional and senatorial elections, the 1960 presidential election, and various foreign policy successes. The

John F. Kennedy Library (2020) then concludes the telling of his story on a somber note, discussing the tragic death of the president during his third year in office. On November 22, 1963, John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas by Lee Harvey Oswald while passing through in his presidential motorcade. At the time of the shooting JFK had been president for just over 1,000 days.

What impact do assassinations have on what we remember about a person? The likelihood that this overshadows the rest of an individual's legacy is high. After all, what do most high schoolers remember about President McKinley or Archduke Franz Ferdinand aside from that? History is littered with all too many examples, and its finally time we begin to set the record straight. John F. Kennedy is remembered as one of the most beloved presidents in United States history even by generations born decades after his time in office. However, his assassination is often the go-to fact we use to explain why. While we remember President Kennedy, we do so for the wrong reason! Surely his assassination greatly impacted the nation. But there is so much more to the Kennedy legacy than many understand. Upon further examination, it is clear that he represented a youthful, exuberant America, a hopeful new generation, and a world that was prepared to change for the better. These reasons more than any other help us to decode the man we know so well yet so little about.

Kennedy began his political career in the House of Representatives (Manchester, 2020) developing and initiating his rise to prominence. A young, handsome war hero such as himself had little to no trouble appealing to the voting majority, and the financial backing to run such an effective campaign didn't hurt either. Kennedy's spirit, energy, and drive outmatched those of his opponents. The most famous example can be observed at the first televised presidential debate between himself and Richard Nixon. The charming senator he was, Kennedy's physical

appearance, and makeup wearing, far exceeded that of his adversary. As mentioned by *CNN*'s Botelho (2016), JFK'S debate performance gave him a significant edge against Nixon, who was broadcast wearing a "gray, ill-fitted suit and hastily added pancake makeup... a pale shadow of the aggressive, composed senator from Massachusetts" (para. 4). A significant aspect of this debate was the importance of physical appearance, something which before the development of television was not a deciding factor of who won or lost. As most government and politics students could tell you, JFK appeared to dominate Nixon on the TV. However, the opposite seemed true on the radio. This speaks volumes to the power of one's image on the perception of the general public, especially in the case of a presidential nominee. While this was one of his first victories on the road to the White House, it was definitely not the last. Kennedy's place in history was secured after a decisive 1960 election.

The recently tenured president inherited a country facing both internal and external challenges. Most notably the Cold War and America's domestic battle for civil rights. Despite his rocky start and the embarrassing military failure that was the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy was successful in accomplishing numerous goals. Perhaps the most well-known achievement of his administration is the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis; an event initiated by the United States' discovery of, "Soviet ballistic nuclear missiles in Cuba which could reach most of the continental United States..." (Selverstone, 2020a, p. 4). Though at times peaceful prospects looked grim, tactful political skill and foreign relations know how created a deal without the necessity of brutal, unwanted aggression or unprecedented nuclear conflict.

Some of President Kennedy's additional successes and impactful actions while in office include the 1961 Alliance for Progress, the ratification of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and the creation of the Peace Corps. In the words of Selverstone (2020a) he was, "instrumental in the

success of the nation's space program" (p. 6). At home, the president slowly chipped away at race issues in the in the United States. Specifically, discrimination, the Jim Crow South, and segregation. While this process often involved, "the occasional limited intervention of the federal government" (Selverstone, 2020b, p.3), it led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in the wake of JFK'S assassination. Some may argue all too little was actually accomplished during his time in office and even that, "Kennedy's sole presidential qualification was his boundless ambition to be president" (Thompson, 1994, para. 4). Regardless, his thousand-day administration saw, and took part in, some of the most memorable governmental actions in modern history.

While each and every one of these accomplishments are impressive enough to be noted, many often forget these specific aspects of the Kennedy Presidency along with many other historical figures. His legacy has been etched in the minds of the American people for much narrower reasons than even treaties and negotiations. In the modern world, what we ought to remember about him- his youthful image, his striking good looks, and the way he so accurately depicted the America we wanted, is clouded by how such a powerful icon and leader was taken from us all too soon. John F. Kennedy's assassination is a considerable aspect of his persisting legacy, but is that really all he should be known for? I argue that this is not the case. In understanding the more complex aspects of the Kennedy persona, far more significant factors deserve such widespread remembrance. And Kennedy is not the only one.

So why is it that some people are remembered, and others are not? And what makes them stand out? Dr. James Kaufman (2009) utilized "three categories of lasting genius" (para. 3) when examining this phenomenon. In his article for *Psychology Today*, Kaufman (2009) identified these categories as exceptional leadership, outstanding creativity, and prodigious performance. A great deal of leaders Kaufman identified came from politics. Scientists, writers, and composers

feel under outstanding creativity. And musicians were included in prodigious performance. While none of this may seem like new information, it holds great significance in a broader sense. If a person isn't an exceptional politician, famed scientist, or talented performer, it appears their chances of remembrance are quite low.

This information didn't sit right with me. Not because I thought of it as glaringly incorrect, but because there are certain qualifying expectations. It is assumed that the general population will remember the important details that places and individual into one of these categories. However, oftentimes people cannot do so. For instance, many people know who JFK is, but I'm willing to bet that it was not for the many reasons I provided.

If I was to take a poll of the general masses, it would likely say that JFK is remembered because he was a president who was assassinated in office. Despite all of his accomplishments, the most popular aspect of the Kennedy legacy is one of tragedy and loss. Unfortunately, the same can be said for many others.

Obviously, an assassination is not something that people are likely to forget. When examining additional sources for why people are remembered, "Die a famous death" (Gorvett, 2017, para. 31) was even mentioned. Although an assassination is surely an unexpected event, its ability to overshadow the rest of a person's legacy is far greater than I had originally expected. Not only do assassinations tend to cloud the rest of what we know about a person, they have the power to chance history as well. I'm sure we've all heard the expression about not "speaking ill of the dead." It appears that for once, even politicians are not immune to the receiving of such human decency.

Examples of such behavior can be observed in the wake of the JFK assassination. As stated by Barnes (2013) in *The Weekly Standard*, "In part because of his assassination,

Americans are not inclined to focus on his shortcomings...” (p. 1). It’s almost as if people begin to have selective memory when it comes to the death of a well-known figure. Upon further research, it appears this may in fact be true. As noted by Kensinger (2009) in a study of the effects of emotion on memory, people tend to remember shocking things more. She says, “when a highly surprising event occurs, a special memory mechanism takes over, causing the moment to be recorded with picture perfect accuracy” (para. 3). Many people today were likely not alive for such a shocking event such as the Kennedy assassination. Regardless, this is likely the primary memory that has been passed down through the generations. We are far more likely to remember the deaths of significant historical figures. Not what they contributed to the world. Now, I may be just a little biased, but I think it’s time to set the record straight when it comes to our 35th president.

The true reason we’re to remember John F. Kennedy’s role as President of the United States is because of his monumental role in American culture. The way in which he used the office as an extension of his skills as a politician and rhetorician, and his predisposition for responding to the many issues of his time. This is where the significance of the Kennedy legacy rests upon. In the words of Richard Reeves (2017), “he was not the greatest president but he was a hell of a politician- candid if not honest, a man who saw greatness and sometimes even touched it. Yet he was unfinished, and he remains forever young...” (p. 5). So, what’s the real reason that we should remember JFK? Should it be only because of his assassination? There exists evidence to the contrary. His legacy ought to remain intact because of something far less tangible. Simply put, JFK represents hope. While his policies and programs may glide to the edges of our memory, what should remain? An emotional feeling: one of years past, present, and future that we so very much desire to experience again. One that reminds us of what can be

achieved, and what is yet to be done. As a person, politician, and president, JFK embodies the idea that all we have to do to change the world is try.

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