

On the anniversary of JFK's death, let's commemorate his life

Opinion

Born on May 29, 1917, John F Kennedy (JFK) grew up to be America's 35th president. At the century mark of his birth, it is appropriate to assess his contributions to the political and cultural landscape of the nation he led.

The 1960s, when JFK served as chief executive, certainly qualifies as an appropriate middle-point of the century which has transpired from 1917 to 2017. Starting with global politics, there were two world wars before Kennedy was elected in 1960, one of which JFK served in. When he took over as president, the Cold War was a hot mess. But after the near-disaster of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the thaw with the Soviet Union began with the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and continued through 1970s détente and a series of nuclear agreements, including the SALT, START, New START, and ABM treaties. Unfortunately, we seem to be going in the opposite direction today as far as nuclear security, even though the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) was awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize.

JFK served at a time when most Americans still had a benevolent view of government. There were several reasons for this, which included a budget surplus, no military draft, and a healthy economy. But just as critical to the positive view of government were policies put in place by the Kennedy White House which emphasized service, such as the Peace Corps. Sadly, citizens' attitudes toward government have changed over the ensuing period, a function of political scandals which seemed to come by the decade: Watergate (1970s), Iran-Contra (1980s), Clinton-Lewinsky affair (1990s), together with examples of gross incompetence at the Federal level: Hurricane Katrina aftermath (2000s) and Veterans Administration backlog in medical treatment (2010s). After these shocks to the political system, it seems wiser to regard government with educated cynicism.

Media coverage of presidential campaigns and of the presidency itself matured during JFK's time. For instance, presidential debates began as a major campaign event in 1960. Although not repeated again in the general election until 1976, presidential debates are now an integral component of the campaign season. While in office, JFK routinized presidential press conferences, giving chief executives a consistent outlet for stating administration policy, but also augmenting White House accountability to the Fourth Estate. That the nightly news expanded to 30 minutes shortly after JFK's untimely death was the beginning of the contemporary 24/7, multi-platform media frenzy we see presently, for better and worse.

Unfortunately, two negative military patterns continued after JFK's presidency ended. First, American intervention in Vietnam in the early 1960s did not end such foreign forays, even with the subsequent searing events of that conflict. While some later wars were justified from the start, others were fought under false pretenses or without U.S. national interests at stake. Second, later presidents were victimized in the same manner as JFK was, namely by an operation planned by a previous presidential administration but run by the

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incoming one. For JFK, that was the Bay of Pigs mission, intended to displace Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba. Just at the latter failed mission hurt the Kennedy team at the outset of JFK's term, so similar tag-team fiascoes occurred at the start of the Bill Clinton (Somalia) and Donald Trump (Yemen) administrations.

The sudden assassination of President Kennedy is one of the first memories of the Baby Boomers born in the late 1950s. Along with later attempts on presidents, that generation has witnessed the rise of terrorism worldwide, ethnic cleansing, and use of chemical weapons in warfare among other travesties. While the United Nations and other alliances were previously able to impact global behavior in a significant way, those organizations are less regarded and successful in stemming political violence than they once were. Conversely, worldwide movements for peace and justice initiated by individuals and private groups embody the altruistic, hopeful spirit which typified the Kennedy years.

Though partly fostered by America's need to catch up to the Soviets in the space race, the Kennedy years demonstrated the importance of technology to American science and society. Many of today's inventions owe their etiology to the culture of experimentation and wonder which characterized the early 1960s, as does the academic curriculum which emphasizes STEM. While the International Space Station has thrived in an atmosphere of cooperation between participating nations, space exploration lagged after the Americans beat the Soviets in landing humans on the moon in 1969. In contemporary times, Americans look more to private enterprise than to government for getting humans back into the heavens.

Even as the 1960s reflect the unfinished aspirations of a country, they likewise represent the positive glow of the man and his times. John F Kennedy will forever remain young and vibrant in the memories of millions, with rock-star-like popularity, a scion from a well-known, well-to-do family whose style is still envied and copied. Given the occasion—the date of his assassination in 1963—this is a time to celebrate what JFK did accomplish as leader of the free world rather than ruminate about what was lost to history's shadows.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.