

Excerpt from *Kennedy* (1965) by Theodore C. Sorensen

How will history judge him? It is too early to say. I am too close to say. But history will surely record that his achievements were beyond his years. In an eloquent letter to President Kennedy on nuclear testing, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan of Britain once wrote: "It is not the things one did in one's life that one regrets, but rather the opportunities missed." It can be said of John Kennedy that he missed very few opportunities.

In less than three years he presided over a new era in American race relations, a new era in American-Soviet relations, a new era in our Latin-American relations, a new era in fiscal and economic policy, and a new era in space exploration. His Presidency helped start the longest and strongest period of economic expansion in our peacetime history. It helped start the largest and swiftest build-up of our defensive strength in peacetime history. And it brought new and enlarged roles for the federal government in higher education, mental illness, civil rights, and the conservation of human and natural resources.

Some moves were dramatic, such as the Cuban missile crisis, the Test Ban Treaty, the Peace Corps, and the Alliance for Progress. Some were small day-by-day efforts on Berlin or Southeast Asia, where no real progress could be claimed. Some were simply holding our own. No nation slipped into the Communist orbit, no nuclear war raised havoc on our planet, no new recession set back our economy. But generally Kennedy was not content to hold his own. His efforts were devoted to turning the country around, starting it in new directions, getting it moving again. "He believed," said his wife, "that one man can make a difference and that every man should try." He left the nation a whole new set of basic propositions—on freedom now instead of someday for the black American—on winding down instead of "winning" the Cold War—on the unthinkable instead of the inevitability of nuclear war—on cutting taxes in times of deficit—on battling poverty in times of prosperity.

For the most part, on November 22, these problems had not been solved and these projects had not been completed. Even most of those completed will impress historians a generation from now only if this generation makes the most of them. But I suspect that history will remember John Kennedy for what he started as well as for what he completed. The forces he released in this world will be felt for generations to come. The standards he set, the goals he outlined and the talented people he attracted to politics and public service will influence his country's course for at least ten years.

People will remember not only what he did but what he stood for. This, too, may help the historians assess his Presidency. He stood for excellence in an era of indifference—for hope in an era of doubt—for placing public service ahead of private interests—for understanding

between East and West, black and white, labor and management. He had confidence in people and gave them confidence in the future.

It will not be easy for historians to compare John Kennedy with those who came before him and after him. He was unique in his effect on the office. He was the first to be elected at so young an age, the first of the Catholic faith, the first to reach for the moon and beyond, the first to announce that all racial segregation and discrimination must be abolished as a matter of right, the first to meet our enemies in a potentially nuclear confrontation, and the first to take a solid step toward nuclear arms control. And he was the first to die at so young an age.

All his life he was a winner until November 1963. In battle he became a hero. In literature he won a Pulitzer Prize. In politics he reached the Presidency. His inaugural address, his wife, his children, his policies, his conduct of crises, all reflected his pursuit of excellence. History and the future must decide. Usually they reserve greatness for those who win great wars, not those who prevent them. But in my unobjective view I think it will be difficult to measure John Kennedy by any ordinary historical yardstick. For he was an extraordinary man, an extraordinary politician, and an extraordinary President. It is my belief that no scale of good and bad Presidents can rate John Fitzgerald Kennedy. A mind so free of fear and myth and prejudice, so opposed to clichés, so unwilling to fool or be fooled, to accept or reflect mediocrity, is rare in our world-and even rarer in American politics.

Without lessening any of the great men who have held the Presidency in this century, I do not see how John Kennedy could be ranked below any one of them. His untimely and violent death will affect the judgment of historians. The danger is that it will turn his greatness into legend. Even though he was himself almost a legendary figure in life, Kennedy was a constant critic of the myth. It would be an ironic twist of fate if his martyrdom should now make a myth of the mortal man.

In my view, the man was greater than the legend. His life, not his death, created his greatness. In November 1963, some saw it for the first time. Others realized that they had too casually accepted it. Others mourned that they had not admitted it to themselves before.

QUESTIONS

1. What events of Kennedy's Presidency did Sorensen feel were the most dramatic? Why?
2. According to Sorensen, what accomplishments of President Kennedy's administration would historians remember? Why?
3. (a) Why did Sorensen say it would not be easy for historians to compare Kennedy to other Presidents? (b) Do you agree with Sorensen's analysis? Why or why not?