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60th Anniversary of the Kennedy Assassination

November 22, 1963, is a day that fundamentally changed the world. It was on this day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and with his death, a new era gave rise. There is no doubt that Kennedy's assassination caused shifts in perspective, government, and the growing idea of conspiracies. However, when you look at the world from the perspective of predestination and curiosity, questions such as "What if it didn't happen?" or "Would anything change?" are brought to the surface. From A to Z, from Civil Rights to the Vietnam War, from birth to death, Kennedy changed the whole world. The assassination of John F. Kennedy led to the birth of an unmatched movement in the United States where people and the government alike were shifting to have a new perspective and form new ideals, and should this death not happen, the world would not be where it is today.

To understand why Kennedy's death was so impactful, you must look at the history that came before him. There have been a total of nine attempts of assassination of presidents in the United States ranging from Andrew Jackson in 1835 to more recently, Ronald Reagan in 1981 (Digital History). However, there have only been four presidents to be officially assassinated, with the last one being Kennedy. Before President Kennedy, the last true assassination that sent the nation booming was in 1901 when William McKinley died. McKinley's death was an act of violence from the anarchist Leon Czolgosz (Library of Congress). However, an impactful

difference from the Kennedy assassination was that this was a time before technological advances. The day after Kennedy was killed, the Guardian released an article saying,

...this is the first assassination of a world figure that took place in the age of television, and every network and station in the country abandoned its daily grind and took up the plotting of the appalling story. At this hour, it begins to form a grisly pattern, contradicted by a grisly preface: the projection on television screens of a happy crowd and a grinning President only a few seconds before the gunshots. (Guardian)

Television expedited and exacerbated the results of this assassination. Within moments of it happening, the world knew of the president's untimely demise. This event sent the United States to new heights.

Immediate changes to the government happened within moments of the assassination. Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn into the presidency mere hours after the assassination and significantly contributed to progressing the change that would occur because of the death of our previous president. Kennedy started to show interest in expanding the rights of all Americans during his term as president, but legislation was never passed. Because of this, he is often accredited for being the jump start to passing the later Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as he inspired Johnson to pass these acts (O'Brien). When Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn into the presidency, he addressed a joint session of Congress to persuade them to pass this new legislation (National Archives and Records Administration). On November 27, 1963, just five days after Kennedy's death, he said:

First, no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so

long. We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law. (The American Presidency Project)

This quote showed America that Kennedy was able to do even more for his country after he died and that his loss was deeply felt. The Civil Rights Movement that followed with the support from President Johnson was monumental, but when you go back and follow the line of success, you find yourself back at John F. Kennedy's death. His death brought so much more to our world than just a loss, it brought a new beginning.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were not the only pieces of legislation to be passed after the death of John F. Kennedy. On February 23, 1967, a new amendment was added to the Constitution (Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum). After many years of the amendment waiting to be ratified, the 25th Amendment was put into effect after the concern of succession was brought to the surface once again due to Kennedy's death. The idea of needing this amendment first rose in 1841 when President William Henry Harrison died a month after becoming president. Since then, there have been multiple cases of presidents dying while in office, leading to the need to clarify how succession would happen in these circumstances. However, there was not much movement on this law until Kennedy's unfortunate death (Bomboy). The addition of the 25th Amendment is now something that will permanently be part of the American government and is likely due to the effects of Kennedy. His legacy lives on in our democracy.

Kennedy's death brought the world to its knees in mourning. The United States was not the only country to feel the loss of a president. His death reached Berlin, Germany where he once

gave a speech on, "...how those who believe communism is good need to come to Berlin and see the horror that the people of Berlin face daily, and that he cannot wait to see the West and the East reunited," (Madeline Snider). Kennedy made such an impact on this community that when he died, Berlin named a street "John F Kennedy Platz" in honor of him. Britain honored him by hanging their flags at half mast and praying for him with Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home. In London specifically, he was treated as though it was a royal death. Tokyo, Canada, Moscow, Paris, Iran, Israel, and Denmark were all stunned by his death and all found ways to memorialize him through streets, prayers, and more (Madeline Snider). His death was not just an American loss. He did not only die in the eyes of those he governed on a daily, but everyone he touched felt and saw his death. This is why he created such an effect on the world after he died. It was not an isolated change, it was worldly.

Conspiracies and lack of trust in the government all stemmed from the mysteriousness of Kennedy's death. While most believe that it was Lee H. Oswald who shot and killed Kennedy on his motorcade drive through Dallas, Texas, others have some reservations about this event (Guardian). To discover the alleged truth of Kennedy's death, the Warren Commission was formed. It was formed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on November 29th, 1963, seven days after Kennedy was assassinated and two days after Oswald was shot. Its members consisted of the following: Earl Warren—chairman of the commission— Richard B. Russell of Georgia, John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, Hale Boggs of Louisiana, Gerald Ford of Michigan, Allen W. Dulles, and John J. McCloy. Together they met for about a year to uncover the truth about the killings of the two men. They eventually decided that it was Oswald who had killed Kennedy and Jack Ruby who, in turn, killed Oswald (Britannica). However, American society did not trust

this answer; questions about covering up the truth stemmed from the findings of the Warren Commission. Conspiracies were not necessarily uncommon to society in the United States due to the wars that had occurred around this period, however, the theories surrounding John F. Kennedy have lingered into the present day with new information being constantly released. Theories such as Oswald being a communist sent out to kill the president were common among people as the timing of the assassination lined up with tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States (Madeline Snider). Others believe that it was Cuba who sent Oswald to kill Kennedy after it was released that the CIA attempted to kill the Cuban leader Fidel Castro (Wallenfeldt). Some believe, including Robert Kennedy Jr., that the United States government, and more specifically the CIA, killed the president due to him not committing United States forces to Vietnam. It was no secret that Kennedy was against the Vietnam War, however, the question is were people so opposed to his belief that they planned to kill him. The CIA claims to have no part in the death, but many think otherwise (Neukam). The conspiracies about the death of our beloved president are some of the longest-standing in our country. Today is still influenced by the death of our president because more and more documents are released as time goes on. In 2017, President Trump was still releasing documents into the National Archive for all to view (Holland, Mason). These conspiracies have shaped the way we think about politics with other countries, and even how we view our own country. For many people, trust in the government was lost after the idea of the CIA being responsible started to form as it felt like no one could be trusted. The mystery behind Kennedy's death remains partially unsolved even if we know who fired the shots. This fact is what makes all of this so impactful 60 years later.

The number of people who remember the tragic event firsthand is slowly dwindling. Oral narratives of emotions during the time are all most people have to understand what people felt. The nation felt a great loss and these feelings have been heavily documented over the years. However, it's what is felt on an individual basis from the perspective of the youth at the time that cuts deep. Linda Knight, who was only 13 years old at the time, said this:

I remember it was a very sad time. Not sure I even put it all together at the time. Some people did think the government had something to do with his death because he wanted to stop the Vietnam War. I remember his son John stood at the crib in a cute little boy suit and saluted his Dad as they drove him down the street for his service. Johnson his vice president then became president. Then his brother ran for the presidency and was also killed. There was no gun violence back then so it was hard to understand. Far from our crazy world now. (Knight)

This depiction of her memory and emotions shows how much the event caught everyone off guard. There is a common connection between most people who were alive when the assassination happened: the lack of understanding of what had happened. Although they were young, this effect is likely due not to age, but to the event being something relatively unheard of. As Linda said, there wasn't gun violence in a non-war setting. This opened everyone's eyes to a new era of life and foreshadowed the death and guns of today's world. Hearing about the shock of people who were the same age as today's teenagers makes us realize how different it was back then and how much of a mess the world is in 2023. We shifted from having the whole world mourn the loss of a president who was shot to not batting an eye when we hear about murder now. The trauma may have stuck with the past generations from 1963, but it made the

generations from 2023 have to learn what life was like before violence appeared to be the first option.

The question of what would the world look like without the violent and sudden death of John F. Kennedy is loaded. A lot of things would be different, but you can theorize that a lot of what happened would still occur, just later in history. Kennedy may have been credited for speeding up the process of getting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but, likely, these acts would still have been passed even if he had not died in the way he did (O'Brien). Kennedy before he died was a strong advocate for the civil rights movement that was taking place and throughout his presidency, it is foreseeable that he would have gotten the two pieces of legislation passed eventually. If not, then should President Johnson get elected after Kennedy, he would most definitely have the acts passed. A similar concept applies to the 25th Amendment. Although the death of Kennedy was the catalyst that pushed Congress to finally work on the 25th Amendment, the amendment could have been put in place in October 1973, during the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew (Bombay). Had Kennedy not been killed, there might have been more trust in the government and the death of Robert Kennedy may have not happened. The conspiracies about the United States government being responsible for this act of violence significantly damaged the trust between the people and the government and had this event never happened, it is almost certain that trust would be stronger than it is today. Granted, other actions taken by the government have damaged relations, but this would be one less thread snapped. As for the potential to stop the death of Robert Kennedy, you have to consider chain reactions. You can theorize that had the first death of a Kennedy not happened, there would be less reason to kill a relatively less powerful person in the family line. All these changes could

affect the way life is today, but they are not the most drastic effects. The “What if?” question expands to a more astronomical event.

The ending of the Vietnam War may have been very different had Kennedy lived through it. Kennedy, although it hadn't been released to the public yet, planned to withdraw from the Vietnam War entirely by 1965 and wanted to start this process by the end of 1963. He claimed that he would do this regardless of if we were winning or not. However, he died before he had a chance to enact this order. This then left President Johnson with a choice: follow Kennedy's plan and withdraw, or stay in the war. He chose to stay in it and officially declared his commitment in November 1963 (Galbraith). This act is what makes the question of if Kennedy had lived what would happen so much more impactful. If Kennedy had never been shot, he would have finalized the order and started to pull troops out of Vietnam, stepping out of the war. All the people we lost and the damage our country took on would potentially have never happened, had Kennedy lived. Stepping out of the war means we would have never lost. The final ending of the Vietnam War, should Kennedy be the one that led us through it is unknown, but the world may be much different now because of it.

To draw to a close, the legacy of John Fitzgerald Kennedy is one that has countless layers of depth. While president he did many great things and left a lasting effect on our country. Nevertheless, it was in his death that he made the greatest impact and sealed his legacy forever. The end of his life gave birth to a new era of laws and progress for marginalized communities. The shock of his death expedited numerous much-needed updates to the country. Kennedy's loss was felt around the world and still is affecting those who lived through it today, burdening their memories. He brought the world to its knees. His assassination brought about more distrust in the

government and gave way to new conspiracies that are still being discussed and debated today. Everything Kennedy touched with his death still affects the world today. Without this pivotal moment in history so much would be different. The world and our conceptions of it would not exist as they do today without the loss of our great president John F. Kennedy.

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