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The Legacy and Impact of John F. Kennedy

The legacy of John F. Kennedy (JFK) remains one of the most notable and iconic of any president in American history. During a time period filled with both global and internal tension, Kennedy became a symbol for the United States to rally behind. He garnered support from both Democrats and Republicans alike and is still remembered fondly in the hearts and minds of Americans today. After JFK's tragic assassination, his golden image was forever preserved in time, a permanent embodiment of American values. However, when discussing his legacy, the magnitude of JFK's actions and values as president are often overshadowed by his reputation. Is the true nature of Kennedy's life and choices reflected in his image or will his legacy forever remain a presidency unfinished?

Due to the sudden nature of JFK's passing, many of his presidential policies and propositions were left incomplete. Although he is often the first name that comes to mind when issues such as the Space Race, the Civil Rights Act, the Vietnam War, or the Cold War are brought up; JFK didn't have the time to follow through on these matters himself. Instead, he was forced to leave his successors to deal with the consequences. For instance, despite being the face of the campaign to land a man on the moon, it was in fact President Eisenhower who began this program in 1958 and President Nixon who saw it through in 1969. Similarly, JFK initially proposed the Civil Rights Act but lacked the follow-through to allow for its passage in Congress, as he feared losing support from his conservative voters. It was instead his former vice president,

Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), who forced the issue in Congress and eventually succeeded in its ratification in July of 1964.

Although JFK left office with a multitude of unfinished actions, many of his decisions left a significant impact on the state of the country. Most notably, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs Invasion, arguably his greatest success and his biggest failure. The Bay of Pigs program was actually approved by President Eisenhower in March of 1960, but JFK quickly authorized the attack barely a month into his presidency. At this time, the United States feared a communist takeover of countries such as Cuba and Vietnam. The goal of this invasion was to overthrow the communist leader of Cuba, Fidel Castro, and instead implement a Western-aligned government, allied with the United States. However, due to poor planning and execution, the Bay of Pigs invasion failed spectacularly. Castro's army sank US ships and rained heavy fire onto US-backed troops; the invasion was over within two days. The Bay of Pigs left an undeniable stain on the Kennedy Administration, but JFK would go on to make great strides in the coming years and redeem himself in the public eye.

Towards the end of Kennedy's presidency, tension continued to grow as the situation deteriorated between the USA and the USSR. Following the Bay of Pigs catastrophe, the USSR had struck a deal with the Cuban government and stationed nuclear missiles in Cuba, to hinder any further attacks. This deal was also motivated by the United States' decision to place Jupiter nuclear missiles in both Italy and Turkey, neighboring countries to the USSR. As tensions worsened, Kennedy ordered a naval blockade to surround Cuba and prevent further introduction of Soviet weapons and supplies; he then demanded the immediate removal and destruction of all Soviet missiles. The two countries had been on the brink of a nuclear war since October 16th and would remain that way for 13 tense days. Finally, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev responded to

John F. Kennedy and acknowledged the indisputable risk of a nuclear war. Eventually, the two world leaders struck a deal and each agreed to remove their missiles from their respective stations. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK spoke to Americans in a 1963 address at American University, “For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal” (Cuban Missile Crisis). At a time when fear and hatred ran rampant throughout the world, JFK urged Americans to reexamine their preconceived notions and strive for peace.

John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. Known to many as “the day America lost its innocence”, this horrific incident went on to become one of the most defining moments in the history of the United States. During JFK’s years in office, he connected with the nation in a way unlike previous presidents. In fact, his presidential debates were the first televised debates in the history of the United States, and he would continue in this fashion, making many televised appearances throughout his career. Along with this, the tense atmosphere created by issues such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War caused a “rally ‘round the flag effect” to occur. The US felt such a deep sense of unity and connection with JFK that he evolved into a symbol of America’s power and strength. When the startling news of his passing reached the masses, it sparked outrage, confusion, and grief across the country. A newfound sense of paranoia and a lack of safety was felt all around the United States. People created theories and conspiracies to make sense of everything that had occurred, and many people are still investigating the uncertainties of the events to this very day. But one thing is known for sure, the impact of Kennedy’s assassination was felt all around the world. Millions of people viewed the broadcast of his funeral and 250,000 people paid their respects to his casket in

person, at the Capitol Rotunda, before he was eventually laid to rest in the Arlington National Cemetery.

JFK's untimely passing left behind a series of unfinished plans and growing issues for his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, to grapple with. Contrary to Kennedy, Johnson lacked an abundance of charm but he made up for this with his political experience. While JFK struggled to push his proposition of a civil rights act in Congress, LBJ was relentless in his efforts and managed to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 early on in his presidency. It is quite possible had Kennedy served a full two terms as president that this act would have been delayed multiple more years, as he feared losing support from his more conservative voters. Much of Lyndon B. Johnson's early actions as president stemmed from his goal to continue the legacy of JFK. In an address following the passing of JFK, Johnson said, "This Nation will keep its commitments from South Viet-Nam to West Berlin. We will be unceasing in the search for peace; resourceful in our pursuit of areas of agreement even with those with whom we differ; and generous and loyal to those who join with us in common cause" (Without Dallas: John F. Kennedy and the Vietnam War). However, his dedication to strive for peace is directly contrasted with actions such as pushing the US into the Vietnam War, and not pulling out of it until both the cost of life and literal cost had become insurmountable. Many historians believe had JFK continued on as President, the United States would not have been nearly as involved in the Vietnam War.

It is also believed that had Kennedy remained president, relations with the USSR might have improved and possibly allowed the Cold War to end sooner. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK showed a notable shift in his attitude towards the Soviet Union. Although he entered his presidency with strict anti-communist beliefs, his ultimate goal of achieving peace seemed to overpower his original stances. For instance, on September 20th, 1963, in an address to the

United Nations, Kennedy actually proposed a joint manned lunar program partnered with the USSR, ““Why, therefore, should man’s first flight to the moon be a matter of national competition? The Soviet Union and the United States, together with their allies, can achieve further agreements-agreements which spring from our mutual interest in avoiding mutual destruction” (What if JFK was Never Shot?). In this same address, he urged the United Nations to provide more aid to developing countries in need of healthcare, human rights, and environmental protection. Additionally, Kennedy established the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which prevented the testing of nuclear weapons from being conducted in areas outside a nation’s jurisdiction. Overall, JFK’s dedication to establishing peace in not only the United States but all over the world became evident in his final months; leaving the world to wonder what might have been accomplished had his life not been taken so early.

This time period in history will forever be marked by the legacy of John F. Kennedy and the tragedy that was his death. Kennedy was assassinated at a time when his presidency was on a positive, upwards trajectory; forever preserving his image as a brilliant and charismatic president. Although Kennedy did not have enough time in office to be remembered as one of the greatest United States presidents, his achievements and philosophies laid the foundation for his successors and reminded the nation of what he could have accomplished, had he not been assassinated. JFK was elected into office at a pivotal time in US history, one that fewer and fewer people are around to remember every day. Through his connection to the people of the US and his bold actions, Kennedy brought the nation together in a time of crisis and is still remembered fondly in the hearts and minds of Americans today. While his legacy may remain unfinished, John F. Kennedy’s life had a profound impact on the United States and his image as a beloved president will survive the test of time.

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