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JFK's Assassination: Influences on History and Contemporary Society

In November of 1963, President John F. Kennedy and his wife First Lady Jackie Kennedy were traveling for the presidential campaign in Texas. After finishing a military related discussion in Fort Worth, the President and his wife embarked on their journey to Dallas (JFK Presidential Library and Museum). Little did they know the events that would soon occur in Dallas would ultimately impact the trajectory of American history and society.

On November 22nd, when the President and the First Lady were on their way to the Trade Mart, three shots were fired while they were passing the Texas School Book Depository. Kennedy was hit in both the neck and head, and was immediately rushed to Parkland Memorial Hospital. In an interview with Ronald Van-Roy, who was a medical student at the time of this event, he explained how one of his professors was working as a doctor at Parkland Hospital the day President Kennedy was brought in. The professor described to Ronald how the hospital's atmosphere erupted into chaos and despair because no one heading to work that day was expecting to experience a national tragedy. It was at 1:00pm when Kennedy was pronounced dead, and the entire country was left to mourn and contemplate the aftermath.

The immediate effect Kennedy's death had on America was the absence of a President. Citizens worried about the vacancy of leadership and the future of the government. However, this concern was quickly addressed as Lyndon B. Johnson took the oath of office within two hours after Kennedy's death. At this point and time the "Constitution never spelled out how a

Vice President would become President if a President died, resigned or was unable to perform the office's duty" (Bomboy). Thus, the need for a clear path of presidential succession forced Congress into action. This ultimately enabled the push to ratify the 25th Amendment. Johnson's Presidency brought forth immense change for the civil rights movement. Through his desire to continue to honor the slain President Kennedy's agenda, Johnson worked to build a coalition of civil rights supporters and utilize strategic timing to create a sense of urgency to honor Kennedy's legacy. This provided momentum for civil rights legislation (Gittinger and Fisher). Consequently, on July 2, 1964 the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law, which would prove to be a pivotal turning point in the fight against institutionalized racism and discrimination.

The death of Kennedy and Johnson's step into the Presidency also triggered change in foreign policy. With the tension of communism still possessing a choke-hold over American society, the country's involvement in the Vietnam War soon rose to become one of the main foreign policy issues. Before his death, Kennedy was open with his support to South Vietnam and the need to gradually increase U.S. military involvement. However, once Johnson took over he was left to face the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August of 1964. Responding to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Johnson didn't shy away from taking the actions he believed necessary to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. Then, Johnson's Operation Rolling Thunder in 1965. This truly marked the escalation of U.S. military involvement, and led to an immense societal response from those on the homefront. With the rise of anti-war sentiment, the war became increasingly unpopular and left Johnson to simply cope with a prolonged and costly conflict.

Many people speculate whether Kennedy would have done things differently. There are those who believe he would have gone to war and there are those who believe he would have

sought a non-violent diplomatic solution. Keeping in mind that JFK was anti-communist and believed in the 'domino theory', the pro-war believers uphold these issues as evidence that Kennedy would have gone to war. "A 1964 interview given by Kennedy's Attorney General brother Robert, also seems to back up the pro-war argument. '...he had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and that we should win the war in Vietnam', Robert spoke of his brother" (History of America). Nonetheless, others still believe differently. These people claim that before his death, President Kennedy had started the process of withdrawing soldiers from Vietnam, having never intended to be there in the first place. Additionally, due to documented distrust of his overconfident proclaimed military advisors Kennedy may have chosen his own path that would have led to a less military escalated outcome compared to Johnson's.

Furthermore, Kennedy's assassination left a lasting mark on contemporary society by shaping public perception and influencing the course of later social development. After talking with Ronald Van Roy about his personal feelings toward Kennedy's assassination, it became evident that this event was a national hardship that left everyone upset and in shock. Ronald discussed how this tragedy opened his eyes to the fragileness of life, even the lives of our leaders. This assassination shattered the sense of invulnerability the country seemed to possess during this relatively optimistic time, ultimately leading to great social change. There were adjustments made to presidential safety, including how presidents are no longer transported in open cars and how they and their families possess Lifetime Coverage. This is a law originally "authorized protection of former presidents and their spouses during their entire lifetime and their minor children until age 16," (ABC News). Although this law was temporarily changed to only 10 years of protection in 1997, the lifetime protection was later restored by Obama under the Former Presidents Protection Act of 2012.

The extensive media coverage of the assassination became a crucial element in social change and shaping public memory. Ronald Van- Roy recalls how the presidential assassination was the main news topic for months. Due to immediate coverage provided at the time, images and videos continuously made appearances within the media, truly allowing this event to be embedded into the minds of the public. Media had a strong influence over the public opinion as well. This is easily noticeable with the media depiction of Lee Harvey Oswald. The diverse and conflicting coverage of Oswald resulted in differing views of whether he was a lone gunman or part of a larger scheme. Additionally, the prevalent media coverage of this event allowed those who were unable to experience this event first hand, to have access to numerous resources allowing them to form their own personal outlook on the assassination.

Then there is the hypothetical scenario of “What If JFK Had Not Been Killed?” which opens the door to contemplation about how America may have differed from what it is today. For instance, it is interesting to speculate that if not assassinated, Kennedy’s vision for space exploration and scientific advancement could have continued to guide national priorities. There may have been an accelerated push toward achieving the goals of the Apollo program. Kennedy’s interest in further exploring the solar system may have caused a more concrete plan for Mars exploration. This possible outcome is even expressed in modern literature, specifically “In the science fiction novel "Voyage" (Harper Collins, 2011) [where] Stephen Baxter, [describes how] the United States lands people on Mars in 1986, after Kennedy survives his assassination attempt” (Oskin).

Lastly, numerous aspects of the Cold War may have differed if Kennedy lived past November 22, 1963. Through Kennedy’s previous diplomatic solutions and his willingness to interact with the Soviet Union, as seen during the Cuban Missile Crisis, may have resulted in a

longer-lasting period of de-escalation. Additionally, Kennedy's concern over the arms race helps demonstrate how his prescience could have led to further progress in arms control.

Altogether, John F. Kennedy's assassination holds a lasting impact on American history and society. His unfortunate death enabled political change, with Johnson's presidency and the work he carried out for Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. The assassination's impact is also noticed within the changes made to presidential security, the media, and society's overall perception of the event. In all, the complex effects of the Kennedy assassination, demonstrate the influence certain events have on the world, shaping the course of history and encouraging further contemplation on how politics and society are all intertwined.

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