

Matthew Zichichi

Oxford Scholar

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### Learning From A Lost Era

In the early 1960's, my grandmother, Judith Legett, who still lives in her hometown of New Orleans, found herself captivated by the charisma and vision of the young President, John F. Kennedy. She was eager to talk to me about events surrounding his death and how it impacted the future of our country for many reasons. She, and her peers, were drawn to the young president. She explained to me that her dear personal friend, a Catholic priest by the name of Phillip Hannan, who later became the Archbishop of New Orleans and also was the priest who married my parents in the 1990's, was a close friend of the Kennedys and was asked to give the eulogy at the impressive funeral of John F. Kennedy at St. Matthew's Cathedral. The funeral became a poignant symbol of the nation's grief, with many grappling with the mysterious circumstances surrounding the president's death. The symbolism embedded in every aspect of the ceremony, from the riderless horse to the eternal flame at Arlington National cemetery, underscored the profound loss felt by the nation, Archbishop Hannan's eloquent address during the funeral in which he recited John F. Kennedy's famous inaugural speech solidified Kennedy's legacy as a symbol of hope and change.

As my grandmother recalls those days, she mentions the mysteries surrounding Kennedy's assassination which fueled a collective desire to uncover the truth and understand the depths of the conspiracy theories that swirled around the event. She describes this as a "loss of innocence and loss of trust in our government institutions that continues to this day. This mistrust in the government had not existed before." The mysterious aspect of his death added an extra

layer of complexity to an already emotionally charged time. “The violence of November 22, 1963, seemed to usher in an era of turmoil and tragedy” according to my grandmother. The subsequent assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr, both symbols of justice who ironically preached "non-violence," left an indelible mark on her generation's collective consciousness. The riots of the 1960s felt, to my grandmother, “like a general degradation of American culture.”

President Kennedy was admired for his commitment to peace and progress. “The rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.”(John F. Kennedy) His efforts towards nuclear disarmament, as seen in the Cuban Missile Crisis, showcased his dedication to global stability. "The only valid test of leadership is the ability to lead, and lead vigorously."(John F. Kennedy) Moreover, the establishment of the Peace Corps demonstrated his belief in empowering young people to make a positive impact on the world. Beyond his political endeavors, Kennedy actively engaged with and supported young people throughout his life. The creation of the Peace Corps was not just a policy; it was a testament to his belief in the ability of young individuals to contribute meaningfully to society. His speeches often resonated with the youth, inspiring them to pursue education, civic engagement, and public service.

Kennedy's vision for a better America and a peaceful world garnered him support, but it also made him enemies. His push for civil rights and the desegregation of schools faced staunch opposition, particularly from those resistant to change. Additionally, his refusal to escalate military involvement in the early stages of the Vietnam War upset some factions within the government and military establishment. Our country is, once again, having to discern a balance of focus between domestic concerns such as crime within our own cities and securing our southern border and our involvement in both Ukraine and the Middle East. It would serve our

generation well to look to the past to determine how to move forward without repeating the same mistakes. Educating ourselves and engaging in healthy conversation with people with various perspectives is key. "The goal of education is the advancement of knowledge and the dissemination of truth."(John F. Kennedy)

The opposing policies implemented after Kennedy's death set the stage for a significant shift in societal dynamics. President Kennedy's inauguration speech, with its famous call to "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," represented a vision of both personal and civic responsibility. However, his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, took a different approach.

Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" introduced policies aimed at addressing economic gaps. While well-intentioned, this marked a departure from Kennedy's emphasis on individual responsibility. Johnson suggested that the government would take care of the poor, inadvertently altering the relationship between citizens and the government. This shift in approach had profound implications for the societal fabric and the balance between personal agency and state intervention. "Once individuals and groups were completely or heavily dependent upon government programs, escape from them was difficult due to the significant loss of benefits if such a recipient wished to find private sector employment at a wage that would greatly reduce or terminate their eligibility. Thus an underclass of more or less permanent wards of the state was created with intergenerational dependency on government transfers growing in frequency." It is evident in the political climate today that our country remains fairly evenly divided in its opinion of how "big" our government should be and how involved it should be in our individual lives.

But his death did not bring an end to his influence. His dream endures."(Archbishop Phillip Hannan) President John F. Kennedy's assassination was not just a historical event but a

seismic shift that reshaped the trajectory of American society. Speaking to someone who witnessed the events unfold, the emotional impact of that fateful day continues to resonate. The subsequent assassinations, the social upheaval of the 1960s, and the changing dynamics of government-citizen relations have left an enduring imprint on our collective memory. Now, more than ever our generation should heed President Kennedy's message that "The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic."(John F. Kennedy) It is vitally important that we sort through information we receive on platforms such as the news media or social media to learn about government policies that have worked and ones that have failed.

The legacy of President Kennedy's vision remains a beacon of hope and inspiration. It is our duty to remember that "the energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it." (John F. Kennedy) President Kennedy's words and actions echo through time, reminding us of the enduring power of leadership, justice, and the pursuit of a better world. "His dream endures," (Archbishop Phillip Hannan)

## Work Cited