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### On The Kennedy Assassination and Its Implications

The assassination of 35th President John F. Kennedy in 1963 rocked not only the United States, but the world, and remains one of the most traumatic and defining moments in modern American history 60 years later. As one of the most popular US presidents of all time and in office during a crucial time for the nation, Kennedy was the backbone and face of America during his term. His death triggered a series of events that fundamentally changed not only the immediate time period but the course of American society, and the nation would be wholly different had it never occurred.

The most frequently asked question whenever anything related to the Kennedy assassination is “What if it didn’t happen?”. While any answers to this question are merely speculation, reasonable assumptions can be made based on Kennedy’s political history, that of his administration, and the state of the nation and the world at the time.

One of the prevalent issues facing America leading up to, and during, Kennedy’s time in office was that of civil rights. Dispute the judicial denouncing of segregation with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the desegregation of schools took some time to take hold, and even longer to be fully incorporated into American society. Kennedy first drafted the Civil Rights Act, which would later be passed in 1964, in 1963. His controversial bill faced immense pushback from Congress and the American people, and while he planned to fight for its approval, the passing of the Civil Rights Act would’ve been especially difficult for Kennedy in 1964, an

election year. Ultimately it was able to pass under Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's successor, and largely due to sympathy from the nation following his assassination. However, without Johnson's landslide election and his testament that the passing of the Civil Rights Act would be the best way to honor Kennedy's legacy, the passing of the bill would have been significantly slowed. Kennedy's death, despite being horrifically tragic, drastically accelerated the civil rights movement and its incorporation into American society.

Outside of the continental US, the greatest threat to both Kennedy and America came in the form of the Cold War, which started in 1947 under President Truman. Kennedy inherited the problems of Truman and his successor Eisenhower's administrations. Tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States were extremely high, and several proxy wars and short conflicts were taking place around the world, including one of Kennedy's most prominent failures at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. This CIA operation was created and approved by Eisenhower with the intent of overthrowing communist leader Fidel Castro, but "relying on faulty intelligence, the operation collapsed in two days with the defeat and capture of anti-Castro forces at the Bay of Pigs" (Office of the Historian). Not only was the failure of the mission a devastating blow, but the death or capture of the approximately 1,500 Cuban exiles was catastrophic, and Kennedy accepted full responsibility. Following this, Kennedy met with Soviet leader Khrushchev to discuss the arms race and the accumulation of nuclear weapons. Just two months later the Berlin Wall was constructed. The next year Cuba again became a focus of the Cold War, when Khrushchev reached an agreement with the Cuban government to supply them nuclear missiles, capable of protecting the island from another US invasion. Naturally, the existence of nuclear missile sites so close to the American mainland was a major security threat, and Khrushchev recognized the possibility of the crisis escalating into a nuclear war. The Cuban

missiles were removed, and America promised not to reinvade Cuba. This was the first step towards diplomacy and peace between the Soviet Union and the United States, headed by Kennedy's idealism and optimism. Again, just a year later, Kennedy made his stance on the Cold War and the state of the world clear at his American University commencement in Washington, D.C. Here, the president "urged Americans to critically reexamine Cold War stereotypes and myths and called for a strategy of peace that would make the world safe for diversity" (JFK Library). The final months of the Kennedy presidency saw definitive steps towards ending the Cold War when the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed.

This sequence of events perfectly highlights the foreign and domestic policy Kennedy attempted to employ throughout his presidency, striving for peace, cooperation, and understanding. His administration is often referred to as "Camelot" due to its idealistic nature and glorification today. Kennedy's presidency is viewed by many today as one of the best in American history, and the man himself, one of the best and brightest leaders we have ever had. Despite his failures and the persistence of the Cold War following his death, he is viewed as an American legend, and not without reason. As shown above, Kennedy was largely diplomatic and sought peace, and had he not been assassinated the Cold War may well have ended much sooner. His death put a halt to negotiations and existing relationships, prolonging the conflict. Despite this, the United States was able to successfully make it through the conflict without ever facing conflict on American soil, and the work Kennedy did throughout his administration played a crucial role in this.

While he failed to end the Cold War or get the United States out of Vietnam, Kennedy still had a notable, yet short, presidency and is remembered highly because of it. Much like the 9/11 terrorist attacks, anyone alive and old enough to understand Kennedy's assassination at the

time remembers exactly where they were, and the reactions of the people around them. It was a shock, a true and powerful shock. This was America, the heart of the free world and the most powerful nation on Earth, and someone had just killed the president. Americans everywhere, from grade schoolers to the elderly, were in disbelief: “It was just such a shock that anyone would assassinate an American president. I was in disbelief when it was announced over my school loudspeakers during class. Everything stopped, teachers broke down, it was chaos” (Riebli). That was the perspective of a highschooler in 1963, and those in grade school didn’t have a vastly different experience: “The nun who was teaching us at that moment in time broke down in uncontrollable tears immediately we all sat looking, confused and not understanding really what was happening” (Ranney). For those who lived through it, this was a common scene, and for good reason. The unimaginable had happened, and in the midst of a nuclear arms race the United States was without a president. Outside the US, many countries mourned the president’s death as well. Pakistan’s flag flew at half mast (NYT), India’s prime minister expressed regrets that Kennedy’s policies may no longer be practiced, the Generalissimo of Taiwan expressed his grief, Ceylon’s Prime Minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, reached out to Mrs. Kennedy personally to convey her understanding, having also lost her husband to assassination, Malaysia’s Prime Minister called it a “stunning shock to the free world” (NYT), along with countless other countries across the world who mourned in solitude with the Kennedy’s and the whole of the United States. Regardless of age, ethnicity, culture, country, or creed, people stopped and mourned the president and the end of an era.

Today, this event is still viewed as one of the most significant tragedies in American history. Even for those of us who were not alive during the killing and felt its immediate impact, the effects of Kennedy’s assassination are still present today and can be seen in forms as

powerful as Constitutional Amendments. The 25th Amendment was drafted and ratified as a direct result of Kennedy's death and set up the system of presidential succession in the event of the death of the president. Kennedy, despite his short term in office, created a lasting and profound legacy. He was known for his idealism and hope for a brighter world. His vision is still being realized to this day 60 years later and leaves us wondering, "What if?".

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