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Oxford Scholars 2023-24: The Impact of John F. Kennedy's Death

Throughout history there have been many people and events which have left a lasting impression on the world. Only truly unique politicians have the ability to make an impact after death, and very few people's impacts are arguably bigger following their deaths. John F. Kennedy's death resulted in an immense wave of grief and pain throughout the United States and the world as a whole. JFK opened Americans eyes to a new era of politics, in a sense becoming the first “modern” president, bringing a star-like quality to politicians that was never quite seen before. Oftentimes his image in the aftermath of his death has negatively impacted or challenged the images and actions of presidents to follow. Reflecting on the lasting legacy of JFK, as well as his assassination, it is apparent the ways in which JFK and his memory impacted the United States. His legacy set a new standard for charisma within politics and left a deep-rooted impression on economic policy and tax reform throughout our nation. Further, his assassination triggered a widespread sentiment of distrust of the government.

JFK was a starlike figure in most people's eyes due to his classically handsome appearance, but also because of the ways in which he interacted with the public. All throughout his campaign and his presidency people had an emotional tie to the Kennedy family, as they drove throughout the nation with their extended family or were pictured laughing within the gardens of the White House. People were drawn to the image of the “ideal” American family. My grandmother, Christine Farquhar, was a teacher teaching English at an all-girls private school in Dallas at the time of JFK's death. His death, as expected, came as a complete shock to the

entire world during that time. Christine's experience poses a unique opportunity to look at the direct impact of the population within Dallas at the time of the assassination. At the time of the assassination she was teaching an English class. Specifically, she was facilitating a discussion on the poem *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, by John Donne, a poem which coincidentally discusses the themes of death and the end of a human life signified by the noise of church bells ringing. When that news reached her classroom, there was a wave of fear felt by most of her students, as some had important or wealthy family members who were meant to meet with the president. She was uncertain as to how to proceed, so instructed her students to, "take their journals out of their backpacks and write the date and the time, then write as best they could their feelings and understanding of the poem's line ..... "no man is an island entire unto itself, each is a part of the main, .....the bell tolls for thee." " (C. Farquhar, via email, November 2023). Her and her students' reactions to the news was a testament to the vast power and control in which the image of JFK had on the population as a whole. The disbelief and uncertainty felt by the population as a whole had a lasting impact on all parties who experienced these horrific events. People who lived through the time have said that his image inspired people to change and seek things that were never thought to be possible. JFK's father, Joe Kennedy, taught his children that "because they had money, good looks, intelligence and self-confidence, they had a responsibility to contribute as best they could to public service," (Nasaw). This idea, instilled in the Kennedy children, set a new standard of charisma for later presidents and public figures throughout our nation.

Following the death of JFK, it seemed vital for presidential candidates to receive the support, and nod of approval in a sense, from the Kennedy family as whole. Specifically throughout the campaign and presidency of Bill Clinton, there seemed to be a desire to revive the Kennedy legacy. He feared upsetting the Kennedy family, as his predecessor Carter did within

his campaign. He constantly used the President's rhetoric and the record of his policies as he addressed the nation, discussing the times they were living in comparison to those of JFK. He often cited the image of him meeting JFK in the rose garden as a young man, and up and coming politician. Many people loved that, like JFK, Clinton was perceived as an extremely charismatic person. It was widely said that he made you feel like you were the only one in the room upon meeting him, having the fine tuned ability to zero in on you and make you feel special. My mother, Dayna Farquhar, who worked on the Clinton Campaign as a member of the 1992 campaign staff in Washington DC, stated that when she met the president she can, "remember standing in line at a fundraiser, with the president at the front of the line shaking everyone's hand, looking each of them in the eye, and speaking to them by their names. It was as if each person just met a movie star." (D. Farquhar, via verbal interview, October 2023.) Though often like most administrations, the Clinton Administration had flaws of its own, the image and standards set by JFK paved the way for the bridge between politicians and their constituents to be closed. The political culture throughout the United States was altered as President Kennedy set a standard for politicians throughout the nation of personalization and understanding.

After the tragic assassination of JFK there were many questions and concerns raised surrounding the assassination of the president. The Warren Commission, arguably the most controversial commission in the history of the United States, was responsible for investigating the death of the president. Within twenty-four hours of assassination the commission determined that Lee Harvey Oswald had assassinated the president on his own. Due to the speed and manner of this conclusion, people have challenged the legitimacy of the commission as a whole. There are many theories regarding the death of JFK and people are quick to point fingers at possible coverups found throughout the government. This distrust was only illuminated more by the

future actions of his successors. One instance of this sentiment is within the public's reaction to the policies of the Vietnam War. JFK had been planning to gradually withdraw US troops from Vietnam. After JFK's assassination, President Johnson reversed course, thus escalating the war. This change in the direction of the government's position on the war, resulted in the loss of more American lives, making many Americans distrustful of what politicians promised. For many families, including my mother's, this meant more extended time for their loved ones -- brothers, sisters, moms, or dads -- to be at war. This caused strains on the relationships throughout the country. These feelings were amplified as the feelings of grief and fear that had originated from the death of JFK continued to torment the image of the United States as a whole. As my Grandmother stated when asked about her perception of this time, "The world was falling apart. Now I wonder if it will ever be put together again." (C. Farquhar, via email, November 2023.)

Not only did JFK's death impact the ways in which presidents presented themselves, but JFK also left a lasting impression on the economic policy and tax reform within the country. Throughout Ronald Reagan's presidency many Americans often remembered and reflected on the economic prosperity of the 1960s and the JFK presidency, contrasting that to the struggle in the 1970s. Throughout the 70s, Kennedy's tax reform policy was thrown to the waste land, even by his successor Johnson. This led to a period of little to no economic growth throughout the nation, providing an incentive and desire to go back to the times of wealth and growth. This task was left up to incumbent President Reagan. From the start of his presidency he credited his tax reform policies to the Kennedy administration, following the model of mass tax-rate-cuts which provided the model and foundation for finances in our nation today. Seen through the eyes of citizens at this time, this move though often undetected, was calculated in a sense, attesting to the immense influence of JFK's legacy on modern politics throughout the country.

The assassination of any leader or representative within a country will trigger feelings of fear and panic that reverberates throughout society, at least for a limited period of time. The impact of JFK's death within our nation has been immense and has touched many aspects of life today. Following his death, many people began to doubt the legitimacy of the information that they received from the government. Within that, there was a sense of comparison to JFK and his actions, whether that be the way in which he composed himself or the policies he enacted. Many succeeding presidents began to emulate him in small ways, this resulted in a sense of remembrance and a new standard for the politicians to be held throughout the country. Overall, the assassination of John F. Kennedy remains a defining moment in American history for not only those who lived through it, but also Americans today.

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