

I Remember that Day in November. I Remember JFK. “The Spirit of John Fitzgerald Kennedy will Never Sleep”

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Fifty years ago, on November 22, 1963, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Conspiracy theorists still debate the identity or identities of the assailant or assailants and Texas continues to give America its right-wing politicians, its narrow religious extremists and its punitive culture of guns, death sentences, oil billionaires and political power-brokers.

Fifty years ago, I attended Catholic High School as a sophomore. As I sat bored in history class, a nun in the hallway gently tapped on the outside glass of the classroom door. Our teacher, a tall lank priest and academic, opened it for a moment. They exchanged whispers. He then returned to his lectern, looked at us coldly and said: “The President has been shot in Dallas”. Seemingly unmoved, he perfunctorily continued teaching history. We sat frozen in shock.

Within fifteen minutes, the general alarm bells usually reserved for fire drills sounded in the hallways. We stood from our seats, filed out the classroom and joined the line of students walking in single file toward the auditorium. Silence was broken sporadically by worried students asking nuns standing erect as sentinels: “Is he alive?” The sisters didn’t respond. So we “knew”.

Hush filled the auditorium. Four-hundred students sat in apprehension. Monsignor S., the principal and a former military chaplain, stood on stage and addressed the assembly. His sentences weaved around the story of America and its past history as if to delay his duty of breaking the truth to us. He mentioned our nation’s founders, its constitution and political structure, then turned his story toward the time of the Civil War and reminded us of President Lincoln. Suddenly, with no reference to President Kennedy yet, he uttered the word “assassination”. Rapt silence was overcome by a collective gasp. Spotted and muffled crying was heard. He didn’t need to continue but did, leading us into prayers for the soul of the president and for the nation. Our minds were paralyzed and our hearts plummeted. We were told to go home.

Mine was an urban high school and trips home on the city bus were down a busy three mile avenue lined with commercial stores. No one was on the streets. Stores were closed. The flag atop the eight-story department store flew at half-mast flailing in the wintry wind. No one spoke in the overcrowded bus filled with teenagers heading home. We huddled together in a funeral cortege drifting toward an uncertain future.

My mother, a seamstress in a “sweat shop”, arrived home early also. The bosses closed the factory mid-afternoon. She rushed through the front door out of breath. Still wearing her overcoat, she implored, “Did you hear?”

Huntley-Brinkley reported live and non-stop from Washington and New York on NBC. All television networks ceased normal programming for the next three days. The city newspaper issued a special edition at 5pm on that darkened late Friday afternoon. A hearse that seemed as white as a corpse received the president’s coffin in early nightfall in Washington. Jacqueline Kennedy’s hand was grasped by Robert Kennedy; the Kennedy children surrounded them as they descended stoically from the stilled plane that carried the dead leader. Joe Kennedy, Jack’s father and mentor whose medical condition was delicate, lay unaware in Hyannis Port; he was not immediately told the news about his son. Rose Kennedy sought solace in her faith and priest. The world seemed to weep in unison. On this day I knew I would never be the same again. Nor would my world.

The year JFK was elected president in November 1960 I became politically aware. I just turned thirteen, was raised by two women and a man who were devoutly religious, Democrats, seamstresses and members of the garment union; he an oil truck driver for Esso. In eighth grade, I ventured independently to study the structure of our government when JFK appointed his cabinet members by early 1961. Who are these men, what are their backgrounds, what does each cabinet member do? I watched each live afternoon broadcast of President Kennedy’s news conferences; watched NET broadcasts (predecessor of PBS) of Firing Line (William F. Buckley) along with Alan Watts explaining Zen Buddhism. I didn’t understand Buckley, Norman Mailer, Alan Watts or Pauline Hendricks at the UN, but was spellbound by the subjects. I was too young to know politics and its devious routes and alleys. I was too sheltered to understand the power of big money; too naive to fathom the contradictions in America society; too hurt, pained, disillusioned and angered that a symbol for America’s and my own positive, progressive future was struck down instantly.

Where is the spirit of JFK today? What became of his politics and constituencies? The nation changed diametrically over the past fifty years. It has become a country swelled with money-centered interests inflating both political parties that together seek to spare no one a dime. The creed is selfishness. The religious temples are investment houses manipulating markets. CEO Lloyd Blankfeld of Goldman Sachs said of himself that he is only “doing God’s work”. In such a world, NRA rallies suitably substitute for “love-ins” and Woodstock. College students are wooed by Libertarianism, not by Tom Hayden or the Port Huron Statement. Today, people are held contemptible who fail to defend the superiority of materialism, consumerism, the assets of millionaires and billionaires, open greed, endless wars, even social disintegration when championed in the names of God, country, the Constitution and free market economy. The new beatitude preached from the halls of Congress and local political pulpits is, “Let them eat straw!”

Yes, JFK is long dead! RFK is dead! MLK is dead! The Great Society is dead! It is Gatsby who lives now! It is Wall Street that lives now! It is austerity reserved for the many! It is racism disguised in political extremism that lives! Economic servitude and debt-slavery live! Wars abound! The wealthy are richer; the rest poorer! The cities are in rubble! The young have no guiding forces but those proffered by neoliberal propagandists and billionaire opportunists. Houses of religion have become political wards of the right-wing. The Democrats are synonymous with Republicans in setting national agendas that accelerate the concentration of wealth into private, corporate and banker hands while maliciously appropriating more from the dwindling coffers of the common person using the guise of a specious rationale

called fiscal responsibility. The elderly and sick must not be a burden on society. Everyone should work long hours for less pay until they drop. We must rid ourselves of the false sentiment of being a “Brother’s Keeper” and from participating in any false social role laid down by irrelevant moralists. The law today is not one designed in a fiat Heaven, it is one dictated by markets and profitability. Caesar must triumph. Render unto Him!

Someone once said more people have died in the name of God than in any other name. This deadly convulsion persists. Added to it is death in the name of, and for the sake of money: death from hopelessness rooted in poverty; from lack of food and medical care; from loss of employment and home. Life itself is a commodity whose worth is measured by someone else’s profit. And what profit a man to lose his money but gain his soul? No profit! Be reasonable. Render!

So it was just fifty years ago I woke from gunshots fired in Dallas and rose from a sixteen-year dream that portrayed life in a different America with a different set of beliefs, ideals and illusions. I woke to a shattering notion of the nation, of raw violence, of how the world actually works and what people will do to each other to gain power and wealth.

JFK is dead! Assassinated, they say, like Lincoln and Gandhi before him and others soon to follow. It is Gatsby who lives now and thrives, I am told. Yet, I don’t know Gatsby. I know JFK. A distant small voice asks:

Will Jack be back soon?

Will he ever come back?

To whom shall the torch be passed?

Where is the new generation?

From where will they arise?

In America, I say, once the tribulation from worshiping the idols of money and power are struck down by their own falsities. It will not be the Orient who receives the torch, it will be America again. But the winds of internal destruction must first destroy what has attempted to destroy the nation. The destroyers who pretend to be protectors, rationalists, pragmatists and defenders of liberty will end by destroying themselves, stripped of their duplicities. That time begins in the present and for the immediate future.

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I remember John Kennedy on that day in November because many of us do not forget, nor will forget. I remember poetry read by Robert Frost years earlier at the inaugural. Frost once wrote, “I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep”.

In due time, miles ahead, the torch will pass to a new generation in this country; promises will be kept.

Until that day, the spirit of John Fitzgerald Kennedy will never sleep.

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