Affairs of State, by Stewart Alsop

Was John F. Kennedy a Great Man?

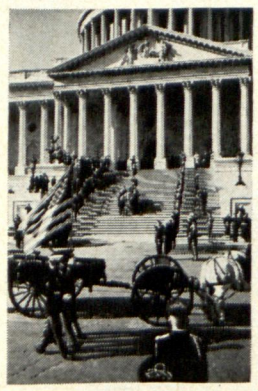
Three years have passed since that lovely late fall day when Washington learned that the young President was dead. Three years have passed since the terrible days that followed, the days of the murder of the murderer, and the rearing horse with the boots reversed in the stirrups, and the drums beating sullenly to the cadence of the human heart, and a Cardinal's anguished farewell: "Good-bye, Jack, dear Jack."

At that time, and for a long time thereafter, it was quite impossible to assess coolly John Kennedy's place in American history. Perhaps it is impossible still. To those who knew him—even those who did not really know him well, like this reporter—the memory of the man is as vivid as ever, and that memory makes difficult any clinical assessments.

And yet, after three years, it is at least beginning to be possible to see John Kennedy's Presidency in historical perspective. In this reporter's opinion, it is much clearer now than it was three years ago that on November 22, 1963, the United States lost a truly great man.

While he still lived, to be sure, John F. Kennedy looked less like a great man than like a President and a politician who was in bad trouble almost everywhere. Many people now look back on the Kennedy years as a golden age. In fact, those brief years were marked by at least one disastrous failure—the Bay of Pigs—and by many semi-failures and frustrations. Kennedy himself remarked early in his Administration, with that unforgettable grin, that "the only thing that really surprised us when we got into office was that things were just as bad as we had been saying they were."

Things were still pretty bad on the day he died. Only a few months before, Charles de Gaulle had kicked the underpinnings out from under Kennedy's European policy. That policy was encompassed in Kennedy's "Grand Design" for a united Europe, including Britain, allied to the U. S. in what Kennedy called "a concrete Atlantic partnership." In January, 1963, de Gaulle icily dismissed the "Grand Design" as "a colossal Atlantic community, under American leadership . . . not at all what France has wanted."



The underpinnings of Kennedy's policy in Asia were equally insecure. At the heart of that policy was Kennedy's commitment to use American power to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. Three weeks before Kennedy went to Dallas, the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem had vastly accelerated South Vietnam's long slide into chaos. When John Kennedy died, in short, he was a President in serious difficulty abroad.

He was in trouble at home too. On the day of his death, all four of his major legislative objectives—aid to education, the civil-rights bill, Medicare, the tax cut—were hopelessly stalled in Congress. His popularity in the country was clearly waning. In the South, Kennedy was at least as widely detested as Lyndon Johnson is today. Perhaps because most big businessmen bored him, he had never established the rapport with business that Johnson still largely enjoys. The liberals who now idolize his memory had then by no means overcome their suspicions of "Joe Kennedy's boy," and their hearts still belonged to the late Adlai Stevenson and to Hubert Humphrey.

Kennedy would certainly have been hard to defeat in November, 1964, but he himself did not think he was unbeatable. He was confident that he could beat Barry Goldwater, but he confided to friends like Robert McNamara and "Red" Fay that he thought he might be defeated, especially if the Republicans nominated George Romney.

In the autumn of 1963, in short, Kennedy seemed a fairly popular but by no means invulnerable President, taking arms vigorously but without notable success against the sea of troubles that had engulfed him. Now, three years after his death, he seems in retrospect to rank with the handful of American Presidents who have achieved true greatness. Why?

To this reporter, John Kennedy established three valid claims to greatness.

For the first, consider a remark that Kennedy's old adversary, Charles de Gaulle, made to a lady politician at a reception not long after he had dismissed so loftily the Kennedy "Grand Design. "There will not be a war, I can assure you that," de Gaulle told the lady. "Under the circumstances, the future of our country is assured." And why would there not be a war? Because the American nuclear force was "the essential guarantee of world peace."

But before de Gaulle could be so complacent, Kennedy first had to prove to the Russians that the guarantee would be honored. He did so twice over, first when he refused to be bluffed out of Berlin in 1961, second when he stared down Nikita Khrushchev in the great Cuban crisis of 1962. He twice proved that the "guarantee" would be honored, if need be, and at whatever risk, by the United States. Kennedy thus made the nuclear deterrent credible. The sequel was the test-ban treaty, which Kennedy himself considered his greatest achievement, and the slow movement toward accommodation between the two sides of the divided world, which is still going on in spite of the Vietnamese war.

His second claim to greatness is suggested by that list of four legislative objectives which were so hopelessly stalled in Congress when he died. They are all the law of the land now. "Let us begin," Kennedy said on that cold, sunny day in January, 1961, when he took the oath of office. Begin we did, and in terms of both material prosperity and social-economic legislation, the last six years have seen a "great leap forward." Great problems remain, but largely thanks to John Kennedy, most Americans now recognize the existence of those problems, and recognize also that they must be solved, at whatever cost.

As for Kennedy's third claim to greatness, it is more difficult to define, and to illustrate concretely. Oddly enough, it has something to do with the way almost all American males under the age of 30 arrange their hair. As far as nature will permit, young American males now brush their hair forward and out, in a sort of prow, to make it look as much like John Kennedy's hair as possible. For they have taken the dead President as their model.

It is hard to imagine a better one. Kennedy was no Miss Priss. In his youth he was a very gay blade indeed, and in his middle age he was a shrewd, tough, practicing politician. But he was also a thoroughly *good* man—incapable of meanness or pettiness, kind when kindness mattered, steely-strong when strength was needed, a man who, without ostentation, deeply loved his country. The fact that John Kennedy now serves as a model—and not only in the matter of hair styles—to those who will one day take over the country may in the end stand out as the most valid of all his claims to greatness.

Stewart Alsop





