

THE DAY THE FUTURE DIED: WHAT IF PRESIDENT KENNEDY HAD LIVED?

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The 50th anniversary of the assassination of President Kennedy is here. Had Kennedy lived and most likely been reelected in 1964, there is some probability that the social and political divisiveness we have suffered as a nation in the past 50 years would have been less severe.

America's innocence began to end around 1967. This is when opposition to the Vietnam War hit its stride. Dissent from this war spawned a social upheaval not previously seen in modern times. Martin Luther King stirred the nation with his August, 1963, "I Have a Dream" speech and civil rights leader Medgar Evers was killed that year. Yet, the full impact of the strife our country was undergoing, in the long overdue effort to dismantle official racial discrimination, did not become that visible until later. The 1964 Republican presidential nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater, harmed himself in the general election by voting against the Civil Rights Act of that year, but his vote did not then outrage the entire nation as much as such a vote would have a decade later. Even with the poignant civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965, our country was not yet in the throes of the extremely intense struggle to end the racism formally perpetuated by various branches of state and local governments.

1968 became one of our country's worst years of turmoil. Opposition to the Vietnam War; the assassinations of both Senator Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King; and the division of many in our country over the civil rights movement, as evidenced by the insurgent candidacy of segregationist George Wallace—who won five Southern states in the presidential general election—made this an exceptionally polarized year. Every controversy that was simmering in the immediately preceding years boiled over in 1968. Kennedy would not have left office until January 20, 1969, had he lived and been reelected. The way it actually turned out, though, both President

Kennedy and one of his two remaining brothers were assassinated in a span of less than five years.

Though not without ambiguity, there is reason to believe that he was attempting to end our military presence in Vietnam. While we can't say for certain that Kennedy would not have escalated the war as his successor did, he did say at his last news conference on November 14, 1963, that he wanted to bring home the Americans who were there. Obviously, the upheaval that our nation experienced over the war would have never happened if, by the time Kennedy left office in 1969, no American troops had ever been sent into combat in Southeast Asia.

Since the 1980 presidential election, we have seen wrenching disputes between religious versus secular perspectives. The "culture wars" have pitted Americans against each other over questions of whether religious beliefs should or should not be a factor in laws under which we all must live. During the 1960 general election, Kennedy addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association and said: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute." During the 2012 presidential campaign, a major candidate, Rick Santorum, literally called this quote nauseating. Yet, in 1960, Kennedy's statement was received with wide acclaim. In 1962, when the Supreme Court's banning of official public school-sponsored prayer resulted in significant opposition to the Court's ruling, the president said, "We have in this case a very easy remedy, and that is to pray ourselves." Our country may not have fully realized it during his presidency, but President Kennedy had a way of soothing, though not entirely eliminating, the nation's then existing divisions over controversial issues. If a president said something like that today in response to a Supreme Court ruling that declared a government-initiated religious exercise unconstitutional, the opposition to such a presidential comment would be much more vociferous than it was back then.

In fact, he went on to say what church/state separationists say today about organized public school prayer. Kennedy took the very position that gets the present-day religious right so aggravated. In addition to the above quote, he further said that people can pray at home and in their churches. This is, of course, the answer to those who otherwise claim to want government to

stay out of economic regulations but want government welfare for religion, that is, direct government involvement in promoting prayer.

In December, 1962, he advocated an across-the-board personal and corporate tax cut. We don't know to what extent this would have played out and what modifications to this idea might have occurred if he had lived and served long enough to see the advent of the modern era of social programs. However, a statement in support of such sweeping tax cuts from a Democratic president, though admittedly in a less divisive national climate than we have today, showed that in that political era, the boundaries of what may be considered conservative and what may be considered liberal were more fluid. Perhaps two full Kennedy terms in the White House would have softened or at least delayed the onset of the ideological polarization we have currently come to see as commonplace, particularly at the time I am writing this, in November of 2013.

During his October 7, 1960, debate against Republican presidential nominee, Richard Nixon, Kennedy said that he wanted a stronger military force. In this same debate, he further lamented the deterioration of our relative strength, compared to the Soviet Union and "the Chinese Communists," during the now concluding administration of Republican President Eisenhower. Again, the left wing/right wing divide was not as pronounced during the 1960 campaign as it was to become later on. Yet, here we still saw the Democratic nominee express the concern that our military needed to be stronger. Moreover, he even criticized the administration of the incumbent Republican president for allowing our military strength to deteriorate relative to two major communist nations. The question again is what impact a second Kennedy presidential term would have had on the ideological fissures that began to appear before he would have finally left office.

He also achieved the first nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviet Union, since the dawn of the nuclear age.

We can't be certain that there would have been less severe political paroxysms if Kennedy had completed a second term. His presidency occurred at a time when the ideological divisions in America were less stark. However, the way he dealt with the issues I have discussed makes it somewhat likely that had he been in office until January of 1969, the onset of such deep

political divisions in America would have at least been delayed. Culturally, we were a significantly different country the day Kennedy took office than we were eight years later when Nixon was sworn in. The “loss of innocence,” the sweeping cultural changes that our nation experienced, between January of 1961 and January of 1969, would have all taken place during the Kennedy Administration.

His presidency has its critics who claim that his charisma and eloquence varnished merely modest achievements into appearing to be spectacular successes. However, my purpose is not to necessarily prove that the Kennedy Administration could boast of actual greatness with regard to what was accomplished. I am just raising the likelihood that the social and political upheavals that we experienced during what would have been his second term may have been less harsh, if we can assume that he would have deployed the same charismatic and comforting way of dealing with contentious issues, as he did during the two years and ten months he was in office. His capacity to bridge gaps between otherwise entrenched contending factions was a talent that functioned independently of any substantive successes or failures of his administration.

He might have even bequeathed a legacy of unifying leadership that could have diluted the intensity of our subsequent political conflicts, when they did ultimately arise. Sadly, then, November 22, 1963, was probably, in many ways, the day the future died.