Reflections on the 40th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination

David North, Bill Vann
22 November 2003

In November 1963, 37 years before George W. Bush was installed as president by means of a political conspiracy, the assassination of John F. Kennedy demonstrated how a man could be removed from the presidency by conspiratorial means.

Forty years after Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, the facts of the killing have yet to be established and the official version of events is broadly regarded as a cover-up.

The killing of Kennedy was a political crime that requires a political explanation. It is this fundamental principle that the Warren Commission was set up to deny, and that has been obscured for the past four decades.

While many critical forensic questions remain clouded in mystery, the prevailing crises and divisions within America's ruling elite provide the most compelling evidence that Kennedy was the victim of a state conspiracy, targeted by a faction of the ruling establishment itself in an attempt to shift the course of domestic and foreign policy. This crime had deep roots in the political climate of the time and far-reaching implications.

The assassination's anniversary has been marked by the media with, on the one hand, sentimental hagiography extolling the legend of "Camelot" and, on the other, exercises in vituperation and character assassination from right-wing commentators seeking to dismiss Kennedy as nothing more than a pill-taking, womanizing political incompetent.

What is called for, however, is a sober evaluation of Kennedy as a figure of his time, with the value of 40 years of hindsight. Marxists begin from a class evaluation of politics, recognizing that Kennedy was a representative of the American financial elite, an opponent of the working class and a conscious enemy of socialism.

We also understand, however, that what happened 40 years ago today had its tragic character, both in the life of an individual and in its impact upon broad masses of working people.

The enduring fascination for Kennedy's very brief administration is not an accident. Both the man and his political career expressed, in a concentrated form, the intense social and political contradictions of the era.

Much has been written about Kennedy's personal history and behavior in recent years. One is left almost with a sense of two lives. His public image was the personification of noblesse oblige, a wholesome and vigorous young president with a beautiful wife and young children. There was something undeniably attractive in his personality, a self-deprecating humor and sense of personal fatalism that was born both of tragedy in his own life and the searing experience of the Second World War.

Hidden from view was a man wracked by disease, dependent upon pain killers and pursing a frenetic sex life with prostitutes supplied by the Mafia.

A similar duality was at work in his political life. He was able to deliver speeches that inspired a sense of idealism—no doubt rooted in the political immaturity and illusions of the time—that marked the beginning, for not a few young Americans, of involvement in social struggles that went far beyond anything that the speechmaker ever imagined or desired.

At the same time, he was engaged in horrifying conspiracies involving brutal counterinsurgency campaigns and assassinations around the globe. His administration worked covertly with extreme anti-communists, assassins and criminal elements to pursue US foreign policy aims, forces that bitterly opposed much of his government's policies. In the end, his reliance on such elements facilitated his own assassination.

It is, nonetheless, worth considering the content of some of Kennedy's speeches, if only to see how far American bourgeois politics has degenerated in the course of four decades. It can be said that Kennedy was the last American president who believed that a public speech should have a genuine social and moral content, and appeal to the public on a high intellectual level.

Announcing the opening of talks on a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviet Union and a US moratorium on atmospheric nuclear tests, Kennedy spoke to an audience at American University on June 10, 1963:

"...let us not be blind to our differences—but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Just a day later, in a televised address to the nation, Kennedy announced that he had ordered federalized national guard units to enforce the desegregation of the University of Alabama and unveiled plans for civil rights legislation banning racial segregation:

"The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the nation in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing a high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning $10,000 a year, a life expectancy which is seven years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much...

"One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free."

And, in a speech delivered at Amherst College in Massachusetts on October 26, 1963, less than a month before he was killed, Kennedy addressed social inequality in America and the role of the artist in society:

"Privilege is here, and with privilege goes responsibility.... In March 1962, persons of 18 years or older who had not completed high school made up 46 percent of the total labor force, and such persons comprised 64 percent of those who were unemployed. And in 1958, the lowest fifth of the families in the United States had 4½ percent of the total personal

income, the highest fifth, 44½ percent. There is inherited wealth in this country and also inherited poverty. And unless the graduates of this college and other colleges like it who are given a running start in life—unless they are willing to put back into our society, those talents, the broad sympathy, the understanding, the compassion—unless they are willing to put those qualities back into the service of the Great Republic, then obviously the presuppositions upon which our democracy are based are bound to be fallible..."

"The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. The great artist is thus a solitary figure. He has, as Frost said, a lover's quarrel with the world. In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role. If Robert Frost was much honored in his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths...

"If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society, it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes him aware that our Nation falls short of its highest potential."

Is it possible to imagine a leading political figure speaking in these terms today? Granted, the words in large part were those of gifted speechwriters and intellectuals assembled by Kennedy's administration. But so, too, there are speechwriters crafting the political pig grunts uttered by George W. Bush—"either you're with us or against us"—as well as those of the political Lilliputians who make up the current field of Democratic presidential hopefuls.

The idealism and the appeal to social justice and reform had a very definite foundation. The Kennedy era fundamentally represented the high tide of American liberalism.

It is worth noting that only 30 years had passed from the time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933 and the Kennedy assassination, a considerably shorter period than the one that separates the assassination from today. The weight of the social movement that erupted in the 1930s and forced the implementation of the New Deal reforms was still present. Mass trade unions organized by the AFL-CIO still represented a major force in American political life.

American capitalism also stood at the acme of its economic and political power. It had accumulated colossal social wealth, while at the same time there remained a broad base of support for the continuation and deepening of the social reform policies identified with the New Deal.

These very foundations, however, were about to be blown apart by immense tensions and contradictions that could not be contained by Kennedy's policies. There existed a chasm between, on the one hand, the hopes inspired by New Dealism and the idealism of Kennedy's speeches among workers, black Americans and intellectuals, and, on the other, the economic system—capitalism—upon which these policies were based.

The popular aspirations of millions for genuine social reform were not sustainable in a system based upon the private ownership of the means of production. Already, by 1963, the dollar had begun to creak under the strains of deepening economic contradictions. Mounting deficits, expanding foreign investment and growing military spending were undermining the domestic prosperity upon which social reformism rested.

Under these conditions, the policies of the Kennedy administration were themselves marked by sharp contradictions and intense conflicts between rival factions within America's ruling elite. It was a government that was compelled to balance between conflicting social forces.

Thus, after mediating a contract between the steelworkers and the industry in 1962, Kennedy attacked US Steel for raising prices by six dollars a ton, conducting a public campaign against the company and opening up a grand jury investigation against it until it rescinded the hike. At the time he commented, "My father always told me all businessmen are sons-of-bitches, but I never believed it until now." Later, he allowed the company to raise its prices.

By 1963 the administration confronted a struggle for civil rights that had moved well beyond the bounds of established politics to become a mass social movement. This generated explosive tensions within Kennedy's own party, with Democratic governors like George Wallace of Alabama and Ross Barnett of Mississippi threatening to organize a virtual insurrection against the federal government. Ultimately this conflict blew the Democrats apart. Kennedy was the last Democratic president to be elected with the undisputed support of what his party once hailed as its "solid South," and the last Northeastern liberal to capture the White House.

American liberalism, both politically and intellectually, was founded upon a lie. It had survived the social tumult of the 1930s and 1940s by striking a Faustian bargain with political reaction. Anti-communism became the prevailing ideology of the US establishment, embraced by Democratic and Republican politicians alike.

Behind Kennedy's idealistic speeches lay the ideology of a mature imperialist power involved in oppression and atrocities around the world. While singing hymns to the human spirit, the Kennedy administration had both feet firmly planted in mud and blood.

This was an administration remembered for founding both the Peace Corps and the Green Berets. While both were instruments for advancing US interests abroad, one appealed to young Americans for self-sacrifice to aid the world's poor, while the other recruited them to murder these same poor, should they challenge Washington's policies and US corporate interests.

To no small degree, the emphasis on social progress and idealism contained in Kennedy's public appeal was the response of more perceptive and far-sighted sections of the American ruling class to the threat of revolution and the appeal of socialism and communism to masses of oppressed people around the globe.

But how US imperialism would confront this threat was the subject of an enduring conflict within the ruling elite that would ultimately claim Kennedy's life.

First there was the issue of Cuba. Kennedy began his administration by ordering the execution of the plan hatched by his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, to invade Cuba with an army of CIA-trained right-wing exiles. When these forces suffered a humiliating defeat at the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy refused to bail out the invasion force, enraging both the exiles and their CIA sponsors. This debacle was followed by a covert CIA campaign to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro with the aid of the Mafia.

In 1962, however, Kennedy ended the Cuban missile crisis by striking a deal with the Soviet Union to remove its missiles in exchange for Washington's pledge not to invade Cuba and to remove its own missiles from Turkey.

This deal, along with the nuclear test ban treaty negotiated with Moscow the following year, was seen by elements within the military and the CIA—not to mention the latter's allies in the Mafia and among the right-wing Cuban exiles—as a fundamental betrayal.

Among the most right-wing sections of the American ruling class, Kennedy's policies, based on the containment of the Soviet Union and nuclear détente, were anathema. While Kennedy was seeking compromise, they wanted a military confrontation to destroy the USSR. The divisions over this policy in the center of the US state were deep and bitter.

Finally, there was the beginning of the protracted US war in Vietnam. Just three weeks before his own assassination came the military coup that ended in the assassination of Vietnamese strongman Ngo Dinh Diem. Kennedy expressed personal horror at the murder, but if taken at face value this horror was compounded by the fact that he bore direct responsibility, having given the green light for the coup to take place.

By the time of his death, the US president confronted a decision to either escalate the US intervention in Vietnam or cut bait. Either course posed potentially catastrophic implications for his administration.

One cannot attribute the course of American political history over the past 40 years to the impact of the Kennedy assassination. Social conflicts within the US itself and contradictions within world capitalism would have exerted their pressures upon a second-term Kennedy administration just as they did on the ill-fated administration of Lyndon Johnson.

Nonetheless, the assassination of Kennedy was a political act whose aim was to shift the policies of the US government to the right. The conspiracy succeeded in accomplishing its aims. Moreover, it ushered in a period of politics by assassination that effectively eliminated some of the most effective leaders of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and the mass movement for civil rights—Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

Kennedy's death marked the effective end of the Democratic Party as it had emerged from the New Deal. From 1963 onward, liberalism was dead on its feet. Increasingly, the policies of both major parties were marked by a shift to open reaction.

Present-day political life in America represents the victory of the very forces that were involved in—and celebrated—the 1963 assassination. The political underworld of CIA assassins, gangsters and criminal elements within the ruling elite with which the Kennedy administration worked behind the scenes have now come forward to openly claim the levers of state power.