

On the 40th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination

12 December 2003

Dear Messrs. North and Vann:

I always read with great interest the WSWS articles on various topics. As a progressive and as someone involved in social activism for 25 years, I come across a lot of material every week and am frequently reviewing commentary on web sites like “Truthout” and “Commondreams.” Much of this commentary, however, is rather predictable and sometimes lacks a sense of review of essential background. In contrast, I find most of the WSWS articles quite well done, extremely current, and generally very well researched and informative—like your piece presenting reflections on the 40th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. If I may, I would add a few thoughts, although I will not engage in a debate on the pros and cons of socialism as political or economic imperative, despite the fact that socialism is a core aspect of your reflections.

I agree that Kennedy is becoming an increasingly enigmatic figure as distance adds a chance for wider perspective on his political legacy. So while I would also agree that his image is growing as an icon of American presidential politics, it also seems that some of the harder truths are being overlooked.

For example, when it comes to legislation concerning segregation or civil rights, Kennedy did little but make inspiring speeches. Those speeches may have laid the social groundwork in some quarters, but he was unable to capitalize on it. It is not well enough publicized that when Martin Luther King, Jr. arrived in DC in August of '63 for the March on Washington, Kennedy arranged for a meeting at the White House and privately told him that Kennedy could not get enough Congressional support to pass a voting rights or civil rights act. The story is that King privately wept after that session, knowing that King and the marchers would be sent home empty-handed.

Further, regardless of all the speculation about Vietnam never becoming what it became if the assassination never happened, Kennedy was gearing up for something in Southeast Asia. All his talk about “it’s their war” masked an increasing level of US advisors and materiel being sent to Vietnam, and Kennedy’s odious cozying up to the hated

Diem regime and his refusal to publicly acknowledge the necessity for elections under the 1954 Geneva cease-fire agreement which followed the French departure after their humiliating defeat at Dienbienphu. A second Kennedy term would not have left the Southeast Asia situation smoldering indefinitely. (True to form, in fact, as to your very correct observation of the Kennedy Doctrine which basically translated as “the enemy of the enemy is our friend,” even if the national leadership in question is the enemy of its own people.)

The so-called “solid South” for Democratic presidential elections never was that solid. Roosevelt’s victories supposedly ushered in that idea, but Roosevelt won everywhere so regional comparisons are skewed. Eisenhower took several Southern States in 1952 and 1956. Truman’s and Kennedy’s victories were confirmed not in the South, but in the Northeast. Johnson’s landslide over Goldwater in 1964 and the Southern support there had much to do with Johnson’s Southern political roots (as well as the factor of Democratic Southern Governors—Carter and Clinton—in their respective victories). I would agree that the South played a role in the Nixon victories of 1968 and 1972, but the real message of those elections was the importance not of the South, but of the Midwest and West. The importance of those regions became even more clear in Reagan’s victories.

The lesson is that no political party can “count on” any region anymore, as political allegiances and populations have so shifted over the past 50 years. I would agree that the loss to the Democrats of any “solid South,” such as it existed, surely played a role in Gore’s defeat. Everybody talks about Florida in the Gore-Bush race, but the real secret was Tennessee. Gore did not carry his own home state. To my knowledge, no presidential candidate in this century has won an election without doing so. If Gore had taken Tennessee, Florida would have been irrelevant. (Why the Gore campaign decided to write off Tennessee I will never understand. I believed that state was winnable for him in '00.)

The Cuban missile crisis is indeed a strange event. The

Soviets had to know that the missiles would be detected and a crisis would ensue. It is being more publicly suggested nowadays that the Soviets, consummate chess players that they are, wanted to ensure the political viability of Cuba in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, and thus the “missile crisis” was, at least in part, staged so that the Soviets could obtain what they most wanted and were unlikely to get otherwise—a pledge by the US never again to invade Cuba. Removal of the US Titan missiles in Turkey (which were old and due to be decommissioned anyway) was irrelevant. So thus might have been, as well, the Soviet missiles in Cuba. In any case, Soviet submarine capability was fast reaching the point of being able to deliver a nuclear strike without warning and through a system much more mobile and much less vulnerable than ground-based missiles. Soviet ICBM capability was quickly improving as well. The Cuban missiles really were an add-on as part of a nuclear war-fighting strategy (if such a thing could sanely be considered). If that was the actual scheme, it was a brilliant move by the Soviets and the US played right into it.

Finally, I would remark that the true irony of the Kennedy assassination and the contradictions of his legacy was actually more clear in the ensuing Johnson years. It was Johnson, not Kennedy, who managed to get through Congress the legislative hallmarks of the liberal agenda which Kennedy personified and could not effectuate—the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the War on Poverty, new initiatives in housing, social security, Medicare, education, all part of the “Great Society.” Even Kennedy’s pronouncement of going to the moon was brought about by NASA funding which was insisted upon by Johnson, when the prevailing wisdom at the time even of the NASA experts was that Kennedy’s vision was a pipe dream and should be left to quietly fade into memory (thus, the Johnson Space Center in Houston being no accident). While that goal was achieved during a Nixon presidency, Nixon had nothing to do with laying the groundwork.

In fact, it is Johnson who further personifies the contradictions of the Kennedy legacy, as if both the domestic and foreign policy initiatives of Kennedy were taken to their logical conclusions in Johnson. The result being great strides in domestic policy (depending of course on one’s assessment of that) coupled with enormous escalation of the so-called “containment” schemes in foreign policy (Vietnam being the most egregious but certainly not the only example). Johnson could have been one of the century’s greatest presidents, perhaps revered on a par with Kennedy, had he not allowed himself and the US military to be so obsessed with, and so undone by, Vietnam. The argument that Vietnam was an inevitable result of the US foreign policy vision is an interesting one, which has much

merit (especially given that further prosecution and escalation of that war continued almost unabated during Nixon’s first term—remember Cambodia?).

All of these are just some additional ideas about the view to be taken of the Kennedy presidency. The even greater crime, of course, is the consistent cover up of what clearly was a well-planned murder involving several actors and certainly well connected at the highest levels. A well-known criminal defense attorney once said that had Oswald lived, the chances were quite good that he would have been found not guilty of the assassination. There is even speculation that Oswald never got off even one decent shot. Sadly, the American people will never know.

On a less political note, America’s heart will always be heavy, I think, at the tragedy that this Kennedy family has seen. One son killed in WWII; two sons—a president and a possible president—both well-regarded and both assassinated; another son who even though a Senator is doomed to spend the remainder of his political life holding up the crumbling edifice of the liberal-left of the Democratic party; one Kennedy son and icon of the family (JFK Jr.) dead in a freak plane accident...the list goes on. I doubt any other political family has faced such massive public pain.

Perhaps the Kennedy legacy is both the hope and the heartbreak of what this country has wished for itself. Nevertheless, had JFK lived, his reelection would have been quite assured. That second term would have been an interesting one indeed.

Thank you for your article.

Chuck Michaels

Baltimore, Maryland

(Mr. Michaels is an attorney and the author of “No Greater Threat: America After September 11, and the Rise of a National Security State.”)



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