

■ "His death diminishes us all."

## THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT

When great men of State die, it is their achievements which come to mind. The tragedy of Kennedy's death is that we have also to mourn the achievements to come. There is a feeling that the future has been betrayed.

When John Kennedy became President, he not only symbolized youth in a world dominated by older men. He brought with him a sense of intellectual adventure. Suddenly, new prospects seemed possible. Life itself seemed more exciting. He seemed to be not so much the heir to an existing political situation as the herald of a new one.

But Kennedy was no visionary driven on by dreams. He was a cool-headed politician with a great regard for facts. Indeed, the intellectual detachment which allowed him to see, more clearly than most men, what needed to be done, also at times prevented him from mobilizing the emotional fervour necessary to overcome oppo-

sition and to carry his policies through.

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This was most true of his domestic policies. He had the courage to challenge deep American prejudices about public spending, socialized medicine and foreign aid. He saw the supreme importance of the Civil Rights issue. And he fought hard to get his views accepted. But his success in these fields was limited. He was thwarted by the cumbersome American system of government, and did not always succeed in overcoming his weakness in the Congress by appealing to the people over their heads, as Roosevelt so frequently did.

Perhaps his greatest successes were in the crucial issues of world affairs. Not that his policies were entirely free of ambiguity. He was, after all, elected after a campaign in which he attacked Eisenhower for failing to deal with Cuba and stressed what subsequently proved to

be a mythical missile gap. But, once in office, he began an intensive study of the facts that never slackened.

The importance of the disastrous invasion of the Bay of Pigs lay in Kennedy's ability to learn from mistakes. He quickly perceived the folly of one of his campaign promises and in subsequent crises — Berlin and Cuba again — he showed a rare combination of caution and daring. The risks he took were based on a cool assessment of the situation. And in this moment of epic success, he resisted all temptation to crow — thus turning victory into constructive achievement.

For Kennedy was quick to see the implications of the Cuban crisis. He realized that it showed not so much the supremacy of American power but the dependence of the United States and Russia on each other. The lesson he drew was that it was necessary for the two Powers to establish a working relationship with each other: that in a situation dominated by nuclear physics, the real enemy was not Communism but instability and chaos.

For the first time, it seemed just possible that America and Russia would pursue a limited common aim, modifying their rivalry to meet the need to prevent nuclear proliferation. In the event, only the Test Ban treaty materialized. But the perception that a new era could be opened, that there were tremendous opportunities ahead for constructive initiative, had been gained.

While Kennedy lived, there was hope that these opportunities would be exploited. With his death at the hands of a crazed assassin, that hope has been lessened, though not entirely destroyed. The new President, Mr. Lyndon Johnson, is an able, perhaps a very able, politician, but a man of a more ordinary mould. And while it is improbable that there will be any dramatic changes in policy — indeed, the new President may be more successful than his predecessor in persuading Congress to accept existing policies — it is difficult to see these policies being further developed to create a new order in our disordered world society.

But as the example of Truman showed, the office of

President can bring out unexpected qualities in those who hold it. The men who helped to shape the Kennedy policies — McNamara, Rusk, Robert Kennedy and others — are still at hand. More important still, the world realities which determined these policies remain the same.

It would therefore be wrong to assume that the new President will change the purpose or intention of American policy. But the effectiveness of Kennedy's Administration lay as much in its *style* as in its actions — the way policies were carried out was as important as their actual content. They were characterized by the President's keen respect for intellect, ideas and knowledge.

It was his style which also gave him his unique personal prestige outside America. His intellectual, somewhat princely, yet keenly professional approach to his tasks had an appeal beyond the shores of America: the sense of excitement which he conveyed quickened the tempo of political life everywhere.

He communicated his own sense of adventure to others. Here was a man who saw himself a world leader, heir not only to America's political legacy, but to Europe's intellectual tradition and, through his Irish ancestry, to the hopes and aspirations of the under privileged everywhere. The final irony is that the most rational of present-day statesmen should have met his death as the result of an apparently irrational act.

In the end, Kennedy's qualities as a man command as much affection as respect. In him, the private man was never lost in the public figure. The friends he made before he became President were the friends he kept while in office. We mourn a man who — with his beautiful wife, his respect for ideas and the arts, his humour, his informality and modesty in the face of the tremendous responsibilities which he fully understood — represented something vital, life-enhancing. His death diminishes us all. — Editorial in *The Observer*, November 24, 1963.