

- The brightest legend of our time — he captured the imagination of a whole generation.

THE MAN WE TRUSTED

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The most grievous assassination in modern history has transformed John Kennedy from an embattled president, deadlocked with a hostile and suspicious Congress, into the brightest legend of our time. It was inevitable. The shock and the grief are universal and so great. Emotions have poured out — and they have gilded the truth. Yet that too may be misleading, for the emotions were part of the truth; and if Kennedy is remembered, as I think he may be, along with Lincoln and FDR as one of the great presidents, it will be more because he captured the imagination of a whole generation in almost every corner of the world than because he succeeded in fulfilling the purposes to which he dedicated his presidency.

His great achievement, for which the world outside America chiefly honours him

this week, was his leadership of the western alliance. When he took over, we walked in the shadow of nuclear war. Two years and 10 months later, the dialogue between the White House and the Kremlin has proceeded so far that no one can doubt the genuineness of Khrushchev's dismay at the young President's death. Yet he wrought this change without any surrender of vital interest, by strength and not by weakness. He persuaded Khrushchev that negotiations were practicable, because he was himself clear about what could be negotiated — and firm about what could not. The test-ban treaty and the hotline are the visible signs of a business relation between the Soviet bloc and the West, in which each side recognizes the power of the other and the suicidal folly of pressing points of difference to the brink of war. The

differences still exist; the Cold War goes on; errors of judgment by less sagacious men on either side can still plunge us all to catastrophe; there is no more than an agreement to disagree — but that, after all, is the essential prelude to an eventual harmony.

Kennedy's achievement in all this was not one-sided. Nuclear war would be as deadly to Russia as to the West, and Khrushchev has played his part. But few would deny that the initiative has lain most of the time with the White House or that Kennedy's own qualities have been decisive. The three personal gifts which lifted him into the realm of international statesmanship were intellect, steadiness of nerve and the capacity to take decisions. Indeed, this week's inevitable anxiety about the future is — or ought to be — based not on half-baked guesses about President Johnson's capacity or intelligence as a politician, but on the fact that the decision-making machine — which Kennedy created to meet his own needs proved so uniquely well-suited to the strategic demands of the Cold War. The doubt

must exist whether President Johnson, operating through more normal political channels, will be able, however sensible his purpose, to match the speed, logic and certainty of his predecessor. For Kennedy's decisions were his own. The professors, the soldiers, the computers, seldom the professional politicians, were detailed to provide the data and rehearse the arguments. The President listened, reflected, balanced the equation and, fortified by all that intellect and calculation could bring to bear, finally took the decision.

Naturally this method of government was unpopular on Capitol Hill, and the unpopularity was reflected in Kennedy's inability to secure from Congress either the money or the legislation he needed to implement his domestic policies. And this inability amounted to something like failure. Whether it stemmed fundamentally from a lack of profound conviction about liberal causes with which he was saddled by his 1960 campaign-managers, or from the intellect's contempt for the log-rolling of the workaday politicians,

or from over caution about the electoral consequences of controversy, or from a constitutional inadequacy of the Congress to live with the speed of modern decision-making will long be argued by American historians. And in the end we may never know. What we can say this week is that, despite his visible achievement in foreign affairs, the quality of Kennedy's presidency as a whole — apart from the noble and historic decision to stake the whole prestige of the presidency on his civil rights legislation — is arguable.

His quality as a man is to me beyond argument. He brought to public life not only the hard assets of leadership which determined ideas by the grace of his personality and the clarity of his speech. One can only guess, for instance, at the legislative outcome of his battle with Congress and his own party over civil rights. But one can be sure that individual American opinion about the cause of justice for the Negroes has been touched, as never since Lincoln, by the words he spoke. Perhaps his greatest achievement in the end was to turn the gaze of

his own people towards some of the more distant goals of political action and to infuse his pragmatic programmes with the radiant light of tolerance, idealism and purpose.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.' Those words struck the keynote of his inaugural address; they form a message which evokes a response in every radical heart. However limited his social achievement, his approach to politics was fundamentally a challenge to conversatism everywhere. That is why, with all our reservations about where his ultimate convictions lay — they certainly did not lie with the ideological left — and with all our disappointment at his comparative failure to make good the promise of 1960, the left in Britain admired and, when the chips were down, trusted him. He was the golden boy of the post-war world, and we mourn him as a friend — *The New Statesman*.