

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Here, Americans are marking the 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination.

There have been a mix of documentaries, docudramas, talking heads, and vignettes of people who were there on the day looking back at it now.

Confounding the cynics, the remembrances have gone well beyond the Kennedy mystique. They have drawn from much deeper sources.

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The stories start with the tale of his father. He, you may recall, made his billions on Wall Street in the pre-1929 crash days by engaging in the worst forms of financial skulduggery. Many of his trades would nowadays be illegal and would earn the sort of opprobrium reserved for the likes of Enron and Lehmans.

Compounding matters, while Kennedy-senior was FDR's interwar ambassador to our beleaguered British island, he became the worst kind of appeaser and isolationist. JFK, then in his early 20s, stayed close to his father despite disagreeing vehemently over this. He and his elder brother enlisted, much to their father's displeasure and at the cost of his elder brother's life. But somehow, through all this, his relationship with his father not only survived but flourished.

In these accounts, no horns are superimposed onto papa Kennedy's head, nor is there any sepia- or white-washing. Just, this-is-how-it-was storytelling.

As to JFK's presidency, his youth and disarming wit have been set alongside his chronic ailments, medication dependence, serial and reckless infidelities to Jacqueline, reticence on Civil Rights, and plain incompetence over the Bay of Pigs. All of this has all been given the same this-is-how-it-was treatment.

Somehow, that narrative makes his steely level-headedness in the Cuban missile crisis--staring down his own belligerent generals and advisors--even more striking. Quite possibly, we would not be here but for it.

And that makes his idealism--"Ask not"--all the more poignant now.

Certainly, his assassination was a watershed event. But the understated telling gives it a profoundly human colour.

Perhaps that is why the film of him being shot still shocks: in one frame, he's in the car, smiling, waving, and sunny, slightly juddery and out of focus; in the next, a burst of red, part of his head spattered over the trunk, and Jacqueline is crawling back to gather it up, still slightly juddery and out of focus. All in silence.

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You will be familiar with those detective series on television in which scientists of various sorts uncover crimes and perpetrators. One program in this JFK cycle took that approach to determine whether or not there was a lone assassin.

The science itself was engrossing, quite apart from the context. The focus was ballistics--studying the weapon, bullets, wounds, skull fractures, body reflexes, and computer reconstructions of the bullet trajectories back to source. The conclusion was that although the detective and autopsy procedures followed in the aftermath were flawed and poorly conducted, even by the standards of the day, they nevertheless reached the right conclusion. It was a single gunman from the Texas School Book Depository, and he was that sad little man, an ex-marine, who was himself shot less than a week later.

I was somewhat surprised, both at the conclusion and that I was persuaded of it. The thoroughness of the science was impressive. I wonder what the Marine Corps--*Semper Fidelis*--makes of the role their man played.

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But the vignettes of people who were there on the day make it all so intimate.

The morning that day featured a Chamber of Commerce breakfast in Fort Worth at which JFK spoke, his last public speech, with a schoolboy choir there to provide entertainment. One of the choirboys, now in his 60s, remembered JFK thanking them one-by-one, and that Jacqueline had written to the choirmaster to say that he had been humming their tunes later that morning.

Another man, also then a boy, remembered shaking JFK's hand as he passed down the line of well-wishers after his plane had landed in Dallas. The boy remembers being amazed that the President's hand was so warm.

Another, then a young teenager, remembered pushing to the front of the crowd and mustering his courage as JFK approached: "Hello Mr, President. I'm a Catholic". JFK responded "So am I." The boy said "I know." "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "A pilot." "Then you need to study your math." That is a memory to have.

But perhaps the most moving for me was the secret service agent who was standing on the running board of the car behind JFK's as the shots were fired. You may remember seeing him on the film. He stepped off, ran forward to the president's car and jumped on the rear bumper, just as Jacqueline was reaching back and as the car began to speed off towards the hospital. He is greyed now, sailor-weatherbeaten, soft-spoken, matter of fact, and engaging. But his bearing is unmistakably marked by an old deep sadness.

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I wonder how Alistair Cooke would have cast his account of these reminiscences. He might have alluded to the sweep of America's troubles the roots of which can be traced, in part, to those three shots—including Vietnam, MLK and RFK, Watergate, polarization, the invasion of privacy everywhere, and even the kind of cynicism that now greets such anniversaries. And he might have reflected that just as Obama's presidency is still circled by the shadow of assassination, so, in light of its misfortunes, one cannot help wondering how JFK, dead at 46, would have fared had he lived.

We will never know.

And not knowing is all the more reason simply to honour America's this-is-just-how-it-was remembrance of that day in Dallas, fifty years ago today.



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