

Fifty Years Later- November 22, 1963

On November 22nd, we remember a sad and tragic moment in our nation's history. On November 22, 1963, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, President of the United States and Leader of the Free World, was struck down by an assassin's bullet.

John F. Kennedy was the youngest man ever to be elected President of the United States. His youth and enthusiasm had invigorated a nation. He, along with his wife and young children, were a reflection of the young World War II veterans' families with their baby boomer children who were just coming into their own. As he put it, "A New Generation of Americans" coming into leadership positions.. There was great hope as the young president and his advisors, the so-called 'best and the brightest', planned a nation's future.

Volunteerism through programs like the Peace Corps and VISTA engaged America's youth in service to others. Support for the Arts, Sciences, and Education would guarantee America remaining at the forefront of enlightened nations. The promise of a man landing on the moon by the end of the decade along with broader space exploration made us believe that there was no limit to what we could accomplish. Clearly, great things lay ahead.

JFK also reached out to the world. His and Jackie's travels and meetings with national leaders and ordinary people around the world spread the message of hope and promise. A new era of foreign policy was beginning with a president who was a student of the subject and fully understood America's position in the community of nations.

This does not mean that all was perfect during the Kennedy years, far from it. At home, racial and religious intolerance was pervasive. Equal protection under the law was ignored in many states. Millions lived in poverty.

Globally, the conflict in Southeast Asia was growing. The Middle East was then, as it is now, a powder keg. The Cold War between the West and the Soviet Bloc was at its height. School children had to practice atomic bomb drills.

With all of this, there was still a belief that we could make the world a better place. Kennedy's domestic initiatives, particularly on Civil Rights, would begin to right the domestic wrongs, once passed and implemented. His knowledge of Foreign policy would, after some early mishaps, make it clear that the United States would work with all who were willing to work with us. He knew that we always needed to deal from a position of strength and fairness. With this, all things could be accomplished.

All of this is not meant to convey that President Kennedy was the white knight that would make all things right in the world. The myth of Camelot is just that, a myth. Kennedy was, like any other leader, imperfect. He made bad decisions and he made good decisions (Bay of Pigs- Cuban Missile Crisis). He regularly had to balance the best interests of the nation with the political realities faced by all U.S. Presidents. He was the leader of the country and his party. History does show us that he was a good president.

He was also a flawed human being. In the years since his death, much information about his private has become public. He was a man with great charisma, charm, and

wit. He used these gifts in both appropriate and inappropriate ways and he, like all of us, will be judged on the total person that he was. Overall, his legacy is of positive accomplishment. His leadership and public example inspired many of his fellow citizens to believe that they too could attain greatness in their chosen fields.

This belief that anything was possible was especially true in the Irish Catholic communities in America, not that the election of President Kennedy was the genesis of that belief. The Irish Catholic community had already proven itself again and again. As a people who had come to this country and faced almost universal discrimination and abuse due to their ethnicity and religion, they had already accomplished much in the century prior to Kennedy's election. JFK's own family was an example of this. Both of his grandfathers were successful businessmen, community leaders, and political figures. His father was a hugely successful banker, businessman, and entrepreneur. He was one of the wealthiest men in America and exerted great influence in U.S. domestic and foreign policy. By the time of President Kennedy's election, Irish Americans had succeeded in every facet of American life.

The great significance of Kennedy's election to us as Irish American Catholics is that it knocked down the final barrier. From the beginnings of this nation, children were told that anyone could grow up to become the President of the United States. Until the election of John F. Kennedy, this was not true for American Catholics. Finally, 171 years after the election of the first president, a Catholic was elected to our nation's highest office. Against all of the anti-Catholic rhetoric and vitriol of the 1960 campaign, Kennedy came out ahead. That victory was a victory for all who have felt and continue to feel the injustice and pain of religious discrimination and hatred.

As we reflect on the life, accomplishments, and death of our brother Hibernian John Fitzgerald Kennedy this November 22nd, let us reflect on a life lived in hopes of benefitting and helping others. A life spent creating opportunities for the oppressed and the less fortunate. Let us rededicate ourselves to the principles of God, Country, and Family.

David A. Ring

AOH Division 7 and Suffolk County Historian

November 22, 2013