



History that was and could have been with JFK

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Posted Monday, November 18, 2013

We interrupt baseball and the toy factory for this special report on history that was and that should have been.

Given the near wall-to-wall retrospectives on the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination, it's time for an addendum: an open letter to the spirit of JFK:

Having reached late middle age and begotten another generation, I certainly give thanks to your refusal to open fire in Oct. 1962, despite the manic urgings of your generals, especially Curtis LeMay. It's not just the ancient proverb of blessed be the peacemakers, but also the concept those who have seen combat give pause to renewing hostilities.

You've witnessed the horrors first-hand. That's the trait former artillery battery commander Harry S Truman and you shared. War is hell, and by giving the go order, first to the Cuban invasion, then to the B-52s and Titan missiles, you would have unleashed hell on the entire Earth. Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and George W. Bush did not serve in combat, and thus their commander-in-chief actions often blew up in their faces.

As an early grade-schooler during your term, we lived under the cloud of nuclear war and rivalry with the Soviets. The civil-defense siren test at 10:30 a.m. each Tuesday crept us out. The siren's wail was almost other-worldly. Their activations at an unaccustomed time nearly caused a panic. Chicago Fire Commissioner Robert Quinn ordered



Did John F. Kennedy realize how much he had inspired the masses?

the sirens turned on late on the night of Sept. 22, 1959, to celebrate the White Sox clinching the American League. Those who didn't follow baseball and did not connect the dots thought the end was near. Quinn and boss Richard J. Daley had some explaining to do the next morning.

Another shrill sound came over the radio when "emergency warning" tests were mandated. That shook us up, too. Radio sets came with the "CD" symbol for "Conelrad" – the only permitted operating stations in a national emergency -- at 640 and 1240 on the AM band. Public buildings had signs pointing to "fallout shelters," as if cowering in a basement would have done much good 10 miles from downtown Chicago and O'Hare Airport, two prime targets for thermonuclear warheads. Still another jolting noise was occasional sonic booms from high-speed military aircraft high overhead. Rattling the windows of millions of civilians was permitted in your time.

Playground mimics of Krushchev



Nikita Krushchev's ogre status prompted playground mimicry by first- and second-graders. Photo credit Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-B0628-0015-035 / Heinz Junge / CC-BY-SA 3.0.

At least kids could get a laugh or two from the lurking danger. Scott Marks and I mimicked Nikita Krushchev, the supposed biggest ogre in the world, during recess in the Swift School playground in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood, four miles north of Wrigley Field. It was just a bunch of grunts and nonsensical sounds with pointing fingers, but, hey, some fat, bald guy banging his shoe at the United Nations is going to entertain the young'ins. I'd also tell family members if Krushchev came to town, I'd hide under the covers. Our image of the Soviets as bad guys sneaking around was furthered by a popular TV cartoon series, "Rocky and His Friends," in which the villains were the obvious Russians Boris Badenov and sidekick femme fatale Natasha.

Turns out your Soviet counterpart and perceived adversary was all bluster, no glamour and as careful on the trigger as you were. You're to be credited from pushing back from the brink and cooperating with Krushchev to fashion a nuclear test-ban treaty just nine months after the Cu-

ban Missile Crisis. How did everything almost go so wrong only two years after Krushchev planned to build a golf course in his country for a planned Dwight Eisenhower visit that was scotched by the U-2 incident?

Your handling of the missile crisis only enhanced your standing for courage and measured actions despite a series of blunders and non-actions early in your Administration. In the end, you should have known how much you were admired, how that emotion had dramatically grown since your razor-thin election margin in 1960. The mass grief after your death has never been matched since.

I heard about your shooting from a patrol boy at the corner of Fairfield and Granville avenues around 12:55 p.m. on Nov. 22, 1963, after I had transferred to Clinton School in the West Rogers Park neighborhood from Swift just 2½ months earlier. I had a nearly half-mile walk each way to and from home for lunch, and was high-tailing it back to class for the afternoon session beginning at 1 p.m. The patrol boy had a transistor radio. I didn't know how to cuss – I wouldn't learn those words for another two summers, on the day-camp bus – but I still let him know I thought he was crazy to say you were shot.

I learned otherwise a few minutes later in third-grade class. My classmates were murmuring, at a loss as to what to say. As president, you almost were considered a father figure and your office commanded respect. That's the image with which we were raised.

Finally, the schoolmarms who comprised the Clinton staff got the bad news. Mrs. Hindsburger, our teacher, came into the class to hush us up once and for all. "The president is dead!!" she said with cold finality, without any sensitivity to impressionable kids' feelings. No impromptu grief counseling, no re-assurance, no nothing. Sit still and behave, go by the book, just like all Chicago Public Schools lessons plans.

Unearthly cries from special-needs kids

Meanwhile, unearthly cries emanated from down the hall. This was the "retarded" students' class. We had not yet advanced in calling them "handicapped" or "disabled," but blunt or crude descriptions were common in 1963. These kids may not have totally comprehended the disaster as we did, but they knew something was terribly wrong, and reacted accordingly. I will never forget that anguish as long as I live.

Other images and sounds will stick the rest of the way: watching the live murder of your accused assassin on TV, the muffled drumbeat of your funeral procession, the neighbors driving me home down Glenlake Avenue after the Monday morning memorial assembly at Clinton.

Remembering the national mourning and how everything declined afterward, I just wish time travel was possible. With you and brother/assistant president Bobby Kennedy, my desire would be to zip back a half-century and appear in the Oval Office. Before you'd summon the Secret Service, I'd beg you to hear me out for five minutes. I would show you two images in an attempt to promote an epiphany in both of you.

One, I would display a typical living room or kitchen in many African-American homes, and even other devout families. Your portrait is placed on the wall next to that of Jesus Christ. Such a location was the ultimate act of faith and hope in you by multi-millions. Given all the revelations that have taken place in the ensuing decades about your serial womanizing, from interns to gangster molls to perhaps even the greatest Hollywood sex symbol in history, I would have urged you to act the part of the portrait up on all those the walls. Believe me, the sacrifice in not being a typical Kennedy man would have been worth it.

And the love of your wife and better half, Jackie, should have been enough. My Gawd, tape came out years later that she demanded to stay by your side with the kids and not evacuate Washington, D.C. as the Cuban crisis boiled over. Jackie was willing to die by your side. Growing up in a supposed democracy, without a royal family, Americans have a latent desire for a glamorous queen. Jackie filled that bill. And she was a young mother, to whom so many millions of woman could relate. She was at once your best personal and political asset. Any man should have been so lucky.



JFK needed to do an end-around to avoid being bogged down by segregationist legislators like Richard Russell.

But the portrait hanging goes even deeper. So many millions looked to you for a second emancipation, for a process to finish the job Abe Lincoln only started. You tiptoed ever so gingerly into aggressively backing civil rights, as your native Boston's African-American community was so modestly-sized that it made little impact in your political upbringing.

Do the end-around the bigots

Getting your epiphany, you needed to go beyond legislation and use the bully pulpit your citizenry had eagerly granted you. You had to go around Deep South Congressional lifers like Richard Russell and James Eastland, who held back national progress, the ultimate tails wagging the dog. Maybe this might have been too much for one man, but you could not have stopped with ending Jim Crow and ensuring equal rights.

And there also needed to be questions for close allies like Richard J. Daley for presiding over an even bigger powder-keg north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Concepts like warehousing the poor in crime-breeding high-rise housing projects, tolerating *de jure* housing and school segregation, and doing nothing about discrimination in union employment. Plantation politics was practiced all over the North with the scattering of crumbs, but surely not even a half a loaf, for votes. In the real timeline after you were gone, the cities blew up. And now we have intractable problems of poverty, one-parent homes and violent crime in which children are gunned down just walking down the street. That wouldn't have happened to that degree if there were good jobs and housing available for all a half-century ago.



JFK ally Richard J. Daley let things fester in Chicago's inner city.

The other image I would present to you and Bobby is a tape of two 100-story buildings, existing as just architects' doodlings in 1963, collapsing in a fiery heap as if they were hit by a small nuke. They would be shown to illustrate that our real enemies weren't who we thought they were. The moral of the story is the world could not, and cannot, be viewed in sheer black and white. Many shades of gray exist.

Where were the truly best and brightest minds to advise you that the Soviets' supposed strength was a Potemkin's Village, that if the people are not strong and satisfied and secure in their own lives, their center could not hold despite a massive army and a missile force? That Ho Chi Minh, as despotic in his own little world as anyone, nevertheless had no ability to topple another domino to spread Communism to the rest of Southeast Asia and even the Philippines? That Vietnam and China were ancient enemies?

The bottom line is I would have urged you to think and act outside the normal box of politics and convention. You might not have had the votes of the Russells and Eastlands, and you would have angered the Daleys. But you had the more important ballots of public opinion and admiration, and that extended way beyond our borders, as you discovered in West Berlin.

Despite all the lost opportunities at home and abroad, our society has truly made progress since your departure. Your present successor in the White House has committed the political equivalent of the Bill Buckner error, letting the grounder called the Affordable Care Act slip under his glove for a killer error. And yet his opponents can only call him a "socialist," a euphemism employed because they don't dare attack his race. A firestorm of outrage would consume them if they tried. A man of color as president was a flight of fancy in your time. But this man has been elected twice by majorities for which you would have craved.

A woman, a former First Lady, is considered a serious candidate to follow this president into office. Inter-racial marriage has long been legal. Now gays, called homosexuals or degenerates in your day, can marry in a number of states instead of being arrested for just being who they are by the police. Now they can serve openly as police and as soldiers. That is the simple result of the advance of human knowledge.

We've detoured in other ways we could not have predicted. You inspired us to go to the moon before the 1960s finished. We made that timetable with 5 1/2 months to spare. As kids, we thrilled to the successive Mercury, Gemini and Apollo spaceflights, moving ever onward and upward with greater range and manpower each time. A million Chicagoans turned out to welcome the first "moonmen" in Aug. 1969. My younger version of myself thought progress would be linear and we'd be on Mars by now, if not further. Gene Roddenberry launched a whole generation of "Star Trek" shows and movies that made the same supposition of expanding space travel and a united world by the 22nd Century. We won't achieve either. Many of the problems mentioned above drained us of our motivation to look outward. Now we're virtually grounded with scant plans to even return to the moon by mid-century.

We still use the internal combustion engine, a mid-19th Century development, for our primary ground transport. Where are the electric-powered or even the "flying cars" projected for the 21st Century? This is the ultimate example of profits before progress.

Almost 300 years ahead of time advance for computers, communicators

And yet we've technologically moved forward unpredictably down other roads. Roddenberry imagined portable, "talking" computers and tiny communication devices -- "communicators" -- developing for his "Star Trek" universe 300 years after the original TV production. Instead, the masses had such possessions within three decades of Mr. Spock's first furrowed eyebrow. There's good and bad in such progress. Many aspects of life are interconnected and instantaneous, yet we're more disconnected individually and personally than ever before. As a result of the instant-information gratification, the newspaper you purportedly wanted to run after your presidential retirement is an endangered species, the industry shedding employees at a Great Depression rate.

We don't know how the alternate timeline would have proceeded if you had lived. Given all we know about you, we think you would have stuck around for awhile in Vietnam, but not committed 500,000 troops in a full-blown war as did LBJ, hurting progress at home. Speculating on just this scenario, novelist Stephen King, a horrormeister, wrote a book, "11/22/63," in which your assassination is thwarted by a time traveler, but the alternative history ends up far worse than the original sequence of events through no real fault of your own. I'd have liked to gamble on a better outcome, of course with a little inspiration from the future.

I don't believe newspapers and magazines had commemorative coverage of the 50th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination in 1915 as modern media has crafted with 1963-plus 50. You had to have been impactful as a person and leader to generate these remembrances. It's a history lesson for those who were not yet born.

Leadership and inspiration often mean as much as action. I'd have loved to have seen the deeds and personal character atop the images. We would have really had something, and you would have felt the sense of satisfaction in the ultimate of public service. In your own words, it's what you could have done for your country.