



JFK, conservative hero?

By: Anthony Zurcher – November 22, 2013

John F Kennedy is immensely popular, even to this day. If the wall-to-wall coverage of the 50th anniversary of his assassination was not evidence enough, there is a CNN/ORC International poll that gives him a 90% retrospective job approval rating.

His enormous well of public approbation is, of course, due to his full-throated embrace of liberal values. As David Greenberg writes for the New Republic:

The War on Poverty (an idea he had rolled out during the campaign) sought to alleviate penury, especially among the elderly, by pushing for Medicare and expanded Social Security benefits. The President's Commission on the Status of Women endorsed workplace equality, child care facilities for working women, paid maternity leave, better Social Security benefits for widows, and equal pay for comparable work. Federal employees got collective bargaining.

Or maybe Kennedy still holds a place of honour in American memory because he enthusiastically supported conservative values. Ira Stoll, author of JFK Conservative, explains in Time Magazine:

Far from being a big-spending liberal, Kennedy was a conservative by the standards of both his time and today. While he increased military spending, overall he restrained federal outlays. His plan for economic growth emphasized not deficits but tax-rate cuts that he argued would eventually pay for themselves by increasing government revenue. He reduced tariffs in pursuit of free trade, and he took a hard line against communism abroad and at home.

A battle has been brewing over the authentic heirs of the Kennedy legacy, and it reached a fevered pitch in the days leading up to the anniversary of the president's death.

Exhibit A for conservatives is, and has been for years, Kennedy's support for tax cuts in the early days of his presidency. That line of argument is trotted out whenever debates in Washington turn to fiscal policy.

In particular, conservatives like to cite a 14 December 1962 Kennedy speech that contains the lines: "It is a paradoxical truth that tax rates are too high today and tax revenues are too low. And the soundest way to raise the revenues in the long run is to cut the rates now."

"The 35th president was an ardent tax-cutter who championed across-the-board, top-to-bottom reductions in personal and corporate tax rates, slashed tariffs to promote free trade, and even spoke out

against the 'confiscatory' property taxes being levied in too many cities," writes Jeff Jacoby in the Boston Globe. "He was anything but a big-spending, welfare-state liberal."

Conservative elder statesman George Will entered the debate on Wednesday, writing that for liberals, Kennedy's "conservative dimension is an inconvenient truth".

The liberal pushback to these arguments has been quick and hard, with many noting that Kennedy only lowered rates in the highest tax bracket from 91% to 70% - well above today's 39.6% top rate.

Robert Schlesinger, in US News and World Report, writes that Kennedy as a conservative tax-cutter "is a powerful myth, but it is a myth".

Tax cuts for Kennedy, he argues, were a means to an end - in much the same way as tax cuts later proposed by Democratic Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. "The key distinction is that JFK and his successors saw tax cuts as one of many available economic tools," he writes. "Indeed Kennedy, like Obama, favored both tax cuts and spending increases to stimulate the economy."

"Neither Kennedy nor his advisers believed in the subsequent supply-side theory that gained credence in the 1970s, which held that low marginal rates on the very rich were crucial to stimulate investment," writes Matt Steinglass for the Economist. "One of his advisers, James Tobin, explicitly said the income-tax cut would provide a short-run economic stimulus but would do nothing to promote investment 'except in the general sense that prosperity is good for investment.'"

It is not just liberals who have been objecting to the characterisation of Kennedy as a conservative avatar, however. Some on the right are not exactly thrilled to welcome the president into the fold.

"If our 35th president - fiscally profligate, contemptuous of civil liberties, and criminally reckless abroad - is a paragon of modern conservatism, conservatism is in even worse shape than I thought," writes the Cato Institute's Gene Healy. "JFK doesn't deserve the liberal adulation he still enjoys. But neither is his sordid legacy anything conservatives should seek to appropriate."

With the anniversary now almost passed, Kennedy the conservative tax-cutter line will once again be reserved for the occasional column or speech to annoy Democrats. But maybe we can be treated to a round of Ronald-Reagan-was-really-a-liberal stories on the Gipper's 100th birthday celebrations next year.