



Liberals, conservatives both stake claims to iconic leader

By: Chris Cassidy – November 21, 2013

Conservatives are at odds over whether President John F. Kennedy's legacy suggests he was really one of them — and not the liberal icon many have considered him to be.

"Kennedy cut taxes, he built up the military, he was tough on communists and he was attacked by the left-wingers in the press and Europe and on college campuses for doing all these things," said Ira Stoll, the Boston-based author of "JFK, Conservative."

But Gene Healy of the Cato Institute dismissed the claims as nothing more than 50th anniversary hype, calling Kennedy "reckless" on foreign policy and lacking any core party beliefs.

"Really, JFK's legacy is not something that anybody should want to appropriate because he was not a very good president," Healy said. "He didn't have much of an ideology."

But Boston University's Tom Whalen, author of "Kennedy Versus Lodge," said the Democratic president hated to be pigeon-holed as either liberal or conservative, believing that, "Whatever works should be tried."

Roger Porter of Harvard University noted Kennedy appointed Republicans to key positions, but said, "Instead of getting into this liberal/conservative debate, I think it's better to say he was much more of a pragmatist than an ideologue."

As the nation marks the solemn 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination tomorrow, Patrick Maney of Boston College said the legacy debate feels like political posturing.

"People are just trying to claim him as their own," Maney said, "so I think there's a political agenda there."

Larry Sabato, author of "The Kennedy Half-Century," said JFK's wide-ranging views helped make him the most cited president among his successors, especially President Ronald Reagan, who shared Kennedy's hatred of communism and support of tax cuts.

"This has been going on since Kennedy's assassination," Sabato said. "Everybody's right, nobody's wrong. Kennedy was liberal on some things, conservative on others."