



## **JFK's legacy remains subject of debate 50 years after his death: A Closer Look (poll)**

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Friday is the 50th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas, a staggering moment in American history. The weeks and days leading up to the anniversary have been filled with stories looking back at the moment and how it affected the nation.

Kennedy was only 46 years old when he died less than three years into his first term as president. But a Gallup poll this week shows 74 percent of Americans consider him an outstanding or above-average president, the highest ranking of the 11 presidents who have held office since Dwight Eisenhower. A survey of presidential scholars in 2011 placed Kennedy 11th overall in U.S. history, which still placed him the highest since Eisenhower. (Franklin Roosevelt was ranked No. 1 overall, Andrew Johnson last.)

While the anniversary is bringing recollections from people about the day and the usual debate about conspiracies surrounding the assassination, there also is reflection on Kennedy himself: How good was he as president? What is his legacy? And was he conservative or liberal?

The last question is interesting: Both liberals and conservatives are aware of the enduring appeal of Kennedy, so both sides try to claim him as one of their own. Yes, he was a Democrat, but that doesn't settle the argument, as noted by Chris Cassidy of the Boston Herald:

"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."

Nothing conclusive there. But Jeff Jacoby of the Boston Globe echoes Stoll above and believes today's Democrats would not embrace Kennedy:

Since that terrible day in Dallas 50 years ago, popular mythology has turned Kennedy into a liberal hero. Some of that mythmaking, as journalist and historian Ira Stoll argues in a new book, "JFK, Conservative," was driven by Kennedy aides, such as Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who had always wanted their boss to be more left-leaning than he was. Some of it was fueled by the Democratic Party's emotional connection to the memory of a martyred president, and its understandable desire to link their priorities to his legacy. But Kennedy was no liberal. By any reasonable definition, he was a conservative -- and not just by the standards of our era, but by those of his era as well.

Not so fast, says David Greenberg of the New Republic. Greenberg notes that Kennedy once said "I'm proud to be a liberal," and that he called on Americans to trust government to help solve the nation's problems. That's the key to Kennedy's legacy, says E.J. Dionne of the Washington Post:

Kennedy's defense of politics and his celebration of service went hand in hand with his assumption that individual success found its roots in social arrangements that made prosperity and achievement possible. No wonder so many heeded his call to join the Peace Corps and to flock to Washington. Imagine a time when working for government seemed as exciting as joining the tech industry does now. Imagine when Wall Street was sleepy and the public sphere was thrilling.

Liberal, conservative ... moving past that, how was Kennedy as a president? Like any chief executive, he had successes and failures. Geoff Lotus, writing for Forbes, doesn't think Kennedy was a very good executive, but he says JFK excelled at crisis management. He says this was on full display during the Cuban missile crisis, when he resisted calls to strike out militarily against Russia:

He gathered information, asked questions, considered multiple options and allowed the situation to percolate along, hoping and believing that opportunities might present themselves. He made it clear through his communications to Khrushchev that missiles in Cuba would never be acceptable. ... Kennedy utilized back-channel communications, so that both sides could work things out without their ego needs being on the chopping block. He found a meaningless concession (withdrawal of obsolete missiles in Turkey) that would give Khrushchev a face-saver with the senior communists in Moscow. And ... after 13 days, an agreement was reached, the Soviets withdrew the missiles and everyone was able to stand down.

Richard Reeves of the Los Angeles Times describes Kennedy as a "compartmentalized man with much to hide, comfortable with secrets and lies." He says Kennedy does not deserve to be ranked with the top presidents ... but he was an effective leader and should be held in high regard:

Kennedy, like Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, understood that words and images are the way to reach millions of people. The president's job is to lead the nation, not manage the government, which is unmanageable. Nobody remembers whether Lincoln balanced the budget. Kennedy probably doesn't belong on a list of the top five presidents. But I would put him near the top of the next list. Although he served less than three years, he was the most important man in the world at a critical time, the man in charge at a hinge-point in national and world politics, diplomacy and war -- at home and abroad.

Not all memories of JFK are fond. Kennedy failed to deliver on the hope he gave to Latinos and other minorities, says Marcos Breton of the Sacramento Bee, dragging his feet on civil rights issues:

JFK mentioned African Americans and Latinos in his first presidential push of 1960, for which he deserves praise. However, decades of venerating JFK should not come at the expense of an undeniable truth - many people living in America had a very hard road on Nov. 22, 1963, and beyond. For them, hope and innocence were in short supply. Hard battles still lay ahead and good intentions were not enough.

And Kennedy's ideas for a "visionary government" created a poor foundation for Lyndon Johnson and others that followed, says Steve Chapman of the Chicago Tribune:

JFK's domestic plans provided the inspiration for Johnson's Great Society, which likewise attracted plenty of overconfident intellectuals. "In 1962," wrote Dallek, "a group of University of Michigan social welfare experts predicted that it would be relatively easy to end poverty in America at a cost of \$2 billion a year, less than 2 percent of GDP (gross domestic product)." Today, we spend triple that amount, 6 percent of GDP, and poverty has yet to be ended. ... JFK and LBJ set out to prove how much the U.S. government could accomplish at home and abroad, a mission that endeared them to those who believe in the promiscuous use of power. They ended up proving how much it could not accomplish, and how little extravagance can buy.

What would Kennedy's legacy be had he not been killed on Nov. 22, 1963? That's the speculation of the book "If Kennedy Lived" by Jeff Greenfield, an author and political analyst. Greenfield imagines a much different decade of the 1960s had Kennedy lived: A pullout of troops from the Vietnam, thus making the counterculture movement moot. It's a rather idealized vision, according to a historian's review in the Washington Post:

The real Kennedy did hint at a basic review of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. And if he had won a second term, his lame-duck status would have granted him a certain political freedom denied to presidents who have another race to run. But it's worth remembering that the American effort in Vietnam looked promising to most observers until very late in what would have been that second term. Of course, Greenfield's Kennedy is blessed with the author's hindsight. Real presidents aren't so fortunate.

Columnist George Will of the Washington Post is amazed by the many attempts to interpret Kennedy and his presidency, as well as by writers like Greenfield who speculate about what JFK would have done had he lived. He goes on to offer his own thoughts on Kennedy:

The Kennedy library here where he lived draws substantially fewer visitors than does Dallas' Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, where he was murdered. This is emblematic of a melancholy fact: How he died looms larger in the nation's mind than how he lived. His truncated life remains an unfinished book and hence tempts writers who would complete it as they wish it had been written. This month, let it suffice to say what Stephen Spender did in "The Truly Great" (1932): "Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun. And left the vivid air signed with their honour."