

JFK and That Hard Rain

By Michael Ventura

Friday, November 22, 2013

When boomers and their offspring die out, Kennedy's assassination will have the approximate historical echo of William McKinley's

Ninth-grade English, April, 1960: Our teacher asked us to write about "the spring, 250 words," but didn't say which spring, so I wrote about every spring I could think of, including the spring in my ballpoint pen and the spring in my step. Every spring but the season of spring.

Our assignment soon after: "the flag, 250 words." A more complicated subject. I took a roundabout approach.

See, like every public school kid in America, I knew the drill: When the sirens screech and the commie Russian atomic missiles head straight for us like a hard rain (as Bob Dylan later put it), we'll be more or less fine if we crouch under our desks with butts in the air and arms over our heads – which proved to me that grownups will lie about anything. We kids saw those bombs explode in newsreels after every show-and-tell "test." We knew about fallout. We knew, come that hard rain, we shall all die. The whole damn world would die.

So in "the flag, 250 words," my argument was straightforward: No country was worth the elimination of humanity. If Russia attacks with nukes, it would be fundamentally immoral for the U.S. to retaliate. Let our country be the only country destroyed. If we sacrifice ourselves, there won't be as much fallout and humanity might still have a chance. If humanity survived, and if somewhere in the world an American flag survived, that flag would be the most precious piece of history that ever was, and the United States would be honored by all human beings for thousands and thousands of years.

My teacher thought I was dangerously nuts. And "only 14" – too young to have ideas. But sometimes a 14-year-old can be right. All these years later, I see nothing flawed in my argument.

Fast-forward to Monday, October 22, 1962, nine days before my 17th birthday. On every TV channel simultaneously, President John F. Kennedy told us that the Russians had missiles in commie Cuba: "We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth, but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced."

Won't unnecessarily risk but won't shrink from that risk? In other words, there may soon be a necessary reason to end all our lives, and we should be prepared accordingly.

My thoughts went more or less like this (and still do):

"Kennedy's making it sound perfectly reasonable to blow up the whole fucking world. He wants me to think he's on my side? He actually imagines that he's on my side? He is not, in any way, shape, or form, on my side."

In retrospect, I admire at least this about JFK: On 9/11, George W. Bush went into hiding and didn't come out until he knew he was safe. Kennedy was a lot of things, but not a chickenshit. He remained in the White House during the crisis, a certain target.

However, that didn't mean he was on my side. The inside story of the crisis is fascinating and moving, but, for me, then and now, the nonsense that got us into that mess far outweighs the skill sets (and luck) that got us out.

The Cuban Missile Crisis taught this: Given the proper pitch of emotional and political considerations, these lunatics are willing to kill us all.

One year and one month after that speech, Nov. 22, 1963, JFK went showing off in Texas and got himself shot.

I didn't like what happened. Assassination is anti-democratic. And it was lousy for his kids. And I got it that a president's death is an affair of state for which dignified pageantry is simply good manners. But the inflated, preposterous notion that somehow we had all been changed – America losing some imagined innocence – all because one guy got shot? Nah.

Then my mother and millions of others watched Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald dead on live TV. (I didn't happen to see it live.)

That was new. Assassinations are as old as politics, and perhaps older – in fact, it's possible that an assassination was the first human act that could be called political. But viewing historic violence intimately, in one's living room, in real time – that was new. Fifty years of such coverage has toughened us, but back then it was a genuine shock – and, in retrospect, a truthful window into the future.

About three weeks later, disc jockeys started playing the bouncy music of a British band called the Beatles. America suddenly indulged in mass giddiness as readily as it had mourned in mass grief – and the Beatles' haircuts were kind of like JFK's, except longer.

Then a strange thing started happening: John F. Kennedy, dead, took on the aura and status of a great man and a star – neither of which he had been in life. (He barely won in 1960; his opponent, Richard Nixon, had good cause to contest the election – but that wasn't acceptable in those days.)

As for greatness, Kennedy's successor Lyndon Johnson secured Americans the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act, Medicare, and Medicaid. Even ardent Kennedy defenders don't claim he had the legislative chops for such achievement.

Another strange thing happened: Somehow, without a shred of evidence, a kind of legend generated that JFK would have gotten us out of Vietnam (a war he got us into) before that war became catastrophic.

Historian Michael O'Brien, in *John F. Kennedy: A Biography*:

"In Arthur Schlesinger's *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (1978) and [Ted] Sorensen's *The Kennedy Legacy* (1969), the argument is advanced that Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam. But in earlier books by Schlesinger and Sorensen, both published in 1965, when policymakers still hoped to win the war, neither even hinted that Kennedy contemplated withdrawal. ... [Kennedy's] Secretary of State Dean Rusk ... has insisted that Kennedy never mentioned disengaging from the war. 'I talked with John Kennedy on hundreds of occasions about Southeast Asia,' Rusk wrote in his memoir, 'and not once did he suggest or even hint at withdrawal.' ... Asked in 1964 whether his brother gave any consideration to pulling out of Vietnam, Robert Kennedy answered, 'No.'"

No one expects the Kennedy controversies to end anytime soon. Who killed him? How? Was it a coup? Would he have wised up about that war? He wasn't great, but would he have become great? For boomers and their children, irrationally or not, Kennedy's assassination is on an emotional and spiritual par with Abraham Lincoln's.

But I wonder about the boomers' grandchildren and great-grandchildren – and, wondering, I offer a prediction:

When boomers and their offspring die out, Kennedy's assassination will decrease in resonance until it has the approximate historical echo of William McKinley's.

You remember William McKinley – 25th president of the United States, the last to have served in the Civil War and the first to be photographed by the motion picture camera. He initiated the Spanish-American War in 1898, which lasted less than four months but secured America's control of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines (to the lasting regret of their inhabitants) – a giant step toward the U.S. becoming a world power.

On Sept. 6, 1901, at a political rally in Buffalo, New York, President McKinley was shot by Leon Czolgosz, a first-generation Polish-American anarchist. As he lay wounded, McKinley ordered that his assailant be protected from the furious mob. He died of his wounds eight days later.

Fortunately, McKinley, like JFK, had an able vice president well prepared for the Oval Office: Theodore Roosevelt.

And the great lesson to be learned from all this may be that there is no great lesson to be learned from all this.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.