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50 Years Later: Alumni, Faculty Reflect on JFK Assassination

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— It remains the defining moment for millions of Americans — Nov. 22, 1963, the day President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas. Three Illinois Wesleyan University professors reflect on the Kennedy administration, the assassination and its impact on the nation in the 50 years since the tragic event that stunned the nation and world.

Nancy Sultan, professor and director of Greek and Roman Studies, and author of the journal article “[Jacqueline Kennedy and the Classical Ideal](#)”: “It’s unfortunate that the Kennedy administration has been called Camelot, because it more accurately represented the golden age of democracy in classical Athens. They (Jack and Jackie)

both were completely taken with the Athenian democratic ideals of eternal optimism and confidence, the potential of the country to do great things and lead the world by working together, which is what democracy is all about.

“The ancient Greek concept of a hero is not the white hat wearer who saves the day and represents nothing but good.

For the Greeks, the hero modeled extremes. One type of Greek tragic hero is the talented youth who is cut down in his prime. Achilles is perhaps the best example. And in that sense, you have JFK — the youngest president, dashing, handsome, charming, intelligent — he’s cut down before he could reach his full potential.

“Jackie’s actions after the assassination — refusing to change her bloody clothes to show the world the injustice of her husband’s murder, wearing the black veil at the funeral, insisting on walking behind the coffin, the little salute of her son — all of these actions were meant to dramatize the tragedy that a man of such great potential to blossom as our president was cut off at the roots. That’s what makes a Greek tragedy — the loss of a leader’s great potential to do good for his country.”

Michael Weis, chair and professor of history, expert on the Cold War and JFK’s relations with Latin America, who teaches the courses “Recent U.S. History,” “United States Foreign Relations since 1914” and “The Sixties: Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll?”:

Jacqueline Kennedy, accompanied by her brothers-in-law, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and Senator Edward Kennedy, walked in the funeral procession for John F. Kennedy on Nov. 25, 1963.



“The first wave of the baby boom turned 18 in 1964, making ‘youth’ a key theme of the decade. Kennedy got people excited, particularly young people. He gave them hope and encouragement that America could do anything if it really wanted to – that we could eliminate poverty, win the Cold War, put a man on the moon, and create a system of social justice for all races of people. That’s a huge agenda.

“Kennedy was also a vigorous Cold Warrior. After going to the brink of World War III at the Cuban Missile Crisis, he was realistic enough to know ending the Cold War couldn’t be done through military action. He’s the one who went to the Russians to say ‘let’s stop atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Let’s get a hotline so we can talk to each other if we ever have a situation like the missile crisis, and not go through all these back channels.’ Kennedy was both pragmatic and optimistic, and I think that’s a good combination.”

Greg Shaw, professor of political science, who teaches the course “The American Presidency”: “People are a little conflicted in what they want in their political leaders, if they want a savior or a technocrat or something else. In talking about the New Frontier, the Peace Corps, launching the food stamp program, the War on Poverty, Kennedy certainly looked like a savior. And we have to remember people have favorable recall. For example, when people were asked retrospectively if they voted for Kennedy in 1960, more than 60 percent said they did. In fact, it was the closest presidential election we had ever had up to the point, with the vote two-tenths of a point difference. So that cannot be true. It’s more about our longing for heroes.

“I tend to view presidents as individuals situated within institutional constraints. Kennedy was of a particular moment when he could come out and say ‘we need to go to the moon within a decade’ — that’s big thinking. So you might think he influenced other presidents to think really big, but it hasn’t really happened that way because subsequent presidents knew they had limited opportunity or capital, maybe because of a recession or because of the nature of who was in Congress. Others haven’t been able to swing for the fences in the same way.”

In addition, four Illinois Wesleyan alumni who were students in 1963 remember where they were when they learned the president of the United States had been shot, how it affected them then and how the events still resonate today.

Bill Roberts ’64, Springfield, Ill., managing partner, national law firm of Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP, and IWU emeritus trustee: “Even though we were seniors and I had already applied to law school, we were still warmly wrapped in our little world as kids of the Eisenhower era. The wars were over, America was thriving, life was pretty good. Bad things didn’t happen in our world, which was largely sheltered, I believe, and the assassination brought a new reality. Like the whole country, we were stunned.

“Over the years, it’s occurred to me how our system of government survived a sudden and violent event. I was a political science student, and it was interesting to follow the change in leadership. Certainly it was a marriage of convenience between Kennedy and Johnson, yet it was a peaceful transition of government from one to the other. And of course, the picture of LBJ sworn in as president aboard Air Force One, with a blood-stained Jackie Kennedy on one side and Lady Bird Johnson on the other, is an indelible image.”

Patricia (Duetsch) White ’64, performing artist and teacher in Peoria, Ill.: “I was on the second floor of the Memorial Center taking an assessment test prior to graduation the next spring. We were devastated this could occur in the U.S.

The events of that weekend changed the way we viewed the presidency.”

Bruce White '65, performing artist and teacher in Peoria, Ill.: “I was at the Theta Chi fraternity house watching TV in Mother Axline’s living room when we got the news. Our reaction was mostly confused and numb, although some comparisons were made to Lincoln, sort of a ‘here we go again’ reaction.”

Kay (Gebhardt) Ackerman '64, retired in St. George, Utah: “All seniors were taking the Graduate Record Exams in the Memorial Center. At noon we were dismissed for lunch. At the Kappa (Kappa Gamma) house, our housemother’s room housed the only TV. Mother Sibel was watching a soap opera when the broadcast came about President Kennedy being shot. But we had to return to the testing area for the rest of the exam. The proctor acknowledged the shooting but said the testing would proceed without interruption. I had a view out the window and at one point in the afternoon, I looked out and saw a flag on campus being lowered to half-staff. At that time I knew the president had died. I often wondered how that day impacted our test scores.

“I admired the president and was very much looking forward to voting for him during the next election. It was to be my first time to vote, as the voting age was 21 at that time. I was very sad and wasn’t sure what would happen next. There was a quietness throughout campus, genuine sadness, and all scheduled activities were cancelled. Our generation had grown up in the best of times, and the assassination was a cruel awakening. I think we realized our world had changed.”

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