

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Belgrade, Yugoslavia  
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

We learned of President Kennedy's murder at a private dinner at the U.S. Embassy in Prague. It was as good a place as any; for, while our immediate impulse was to rejoin our countrymen, this was perhaps the next best thing. The Embassy itself, a former Schonbrunn Palace, had been acquired for the United States by the late Charles Crane some time before he founded our Institute -- itself an embodiment of the "New Frontier" more than a generation before the phrase was coined. Moreover, most of the guests were Czech (some official, some non-official); and in some respects their grief and sense of loss were as great as ours. A Foreign Ministry official immediately recalled the Cuban crisis of October 1962: "When I think of what another man might have done in those days, I shudder." A young girl asked angrily: "Why doesn't anyone shoot Presidents in this part of the world, instead of in your country?" Her father spoke in another vein:

"After all those old men, with their liver troubles and prostate operations and stale old dogmas, at last we had some hopes. Here was a young man, a strong body and a fresh mind, a man who enjoyed himself, who had the spirit of life in him and not of death. Why should the lives of young people, the future of their children, be dictated by the same old men who have let the world go to ruin? We waited so long for someone new, for someone who cared about the future, who wasn't tired and disillusioned like the old ones. At last we had him, and people began to dream again. Now?"

One could go on recounting the evidences of Eastern Europe's special grief for Jack Kennedy -- the hundreds in Prague waiting in long queues to buy newspapers, the hundreds in Belgrade who brought flowers to the American reading room. The reaction was much deeper in these "Communist" countries than what I observed in Vienna or what our colleague Denny Rusinow encountered in Italy. It was more universal even than the sorrow felt at the death of Pope John (of which we also learned in Czechoslovakia) -- although I suspect that the reasons were in large measure identical. Yet the aptest comment, I think, came from a friend in Prague who had barely survived both the Nazi occupation and the Stalinist Slansky trials.

"I have been thinking of you all morning," he said when we met the day after the President's murder. "It is terrible for all of us, of course -- for the world, for Europe, for Eastern Europe, even for our little affairs here in Czechoslovakia. But it must be worst for

you, for you younger Americans who go out in the world and try to do something, give something, make something. He was your President, wasn't he, more than any of the others?"

He was -- and I wonder if our feelings about our country, our people, ourselves can ever be the same. Edmund Wilson once wrote: "The America I see in the pages of Life magazine is not my country, nor even the country I live in." The America Jack Kennedy tried to bring into being was our country, although (perhaps because) he, like Lincoln and Wilson, was a minority President. He was the first President since Roosevelt of whom we did not feel in some way ashamed. (When Allen Ginsberg wrote of the "best young men of my generation... hunting for a nigger fix," his despair was as much a commentary on the Eisenhower era as "The Wasteland" was on the Coolidge period.)

I recall watching a televised campaign speech by Mr. Nixon somewhere in the Southwest and asking a colleague afterwards: "How, in this day and age, can he be such an awful cornball?" My colleague's answer was cynical but serious. "My friend," he said, "America is a cornball country. It re-elected Truman, it elected Eisenhower twice, it buys the Reader's Digest and the Saturday Evening Post, and couldn't care less about what you and I consider civilization. Of course, Nixon knows better -- but he's also smart enough to know what Mama likes out in Oklahoma City. Those fancy Kennedy ways may appeal to us, but not to them, and they are America, whether we like it or not."

I felt at the time, and still do, that this was only half-true, that there was and is another America. For all our Gilded Ages, some men always remember that our country was uniquely founded by aristocratic intellectuals, men of the Enlightenment, and for the sake of its ideas. Our history is full of aberrations, betrayals of those ideas, and slavery was a cancer at the very start which we have yet to exorcise. Yet through all this, in the consciousness of at least some of the American people, in its oldest cities and institutions and in its literature, there has remained the tradition -- Jefferson, Adams, Madison. Repudiated, debased, twisted, buffeted at every turn by the selfish, the bigoted and the complacent, the tradition somehow rises again, to be deepened by Lincoln, broadened by Wilson and Roosevelt, invoked consciously by the youngest of Presidents, who (mira-  
bile dictu) not only knows the words for whose promise so many have died but believes in them and, with the unique talents of a Harvard-educated, war-wounded Irish politician, knows something about how to bring those promises to pass.

With the freedom (because of his great wealth) to be anything he wished, he chose to be a progressive politician in a democracy -- and that in itself was an affirmation. What he offered us was a sense of possibilities in life, a feeling that what we chose to do might have some larger point. I remember sneering when I first heard his call to the "New Frontier," yet over these three years I have begun to understand what, perhaps only vaguely then, he had in mind. It was a call to all of us, each in our way, to leave the warm burrows of middle-class mediocrity and embark on the "pursuit of excellence"-- which he himself, echoing the Greeks, later cited as his own definition of happiness.

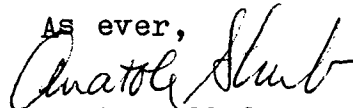
It was a call we answered slowly, reluctantly, for the corrosion of our belief had been deep indeed. How often, in the Truman-Eisenhower days, had the decades' work of dedicated people, the anguished counsel of sage and blooded men, been brushed aside in a moment of transcendent moral idiocy? There were many such moments, but I recall two now with special horror: One was Eisenhower's press conference on June 17, 1953, when he baldly revealed that he knew nothing of the East German uprising which had begun that morning, and before which the divided Kremlin had hesitated many hours before deciding that Soviet tanks could crush it with impunity. Another such moment came on October 29, 1956, when John Foster Dulles in all his righteous blindness greeted the revolutionary wave in Poland and Hungary with the unnecessary, unsolicited and quite fatal assurance that "under no circumstance" would the United States see fit to intervene in Eastern Europe. In neither case, I think, could Jack Kennedy have behaved in such a manner; in both cases, I rather suspect, he would have risen to the occasion.

He was the first president since Wilson who read books, who did not subscribe to the philosophy that "history is bunk" or the even more corrosive faith that que sera, sera. The consolation this offered us was enormous. It was not merely that, if one chose to write something, to contribute some arcane bit of private knowledge, one felt that he might read it himself, instead of accepting the packaged conventional wisdom of a bureaucrat's briefing or memo. Rather, one had the sense that in our larger collective enterprise there was at the head a controlling intelligence -- a man who wished to read and know everything directly, without preconceived ideas, and with the courage and cool, cool judgment to act on his knowledge. We felt, in short, that whatever little work we might do for the causes of freedom, peace, internationalism (all the old, good causes -- cf. Charlie Wilson) was appreciated, that it was worth something, that it was part of a larger work to which the country's best spirits were committed, and that it could not, would not be undone so long as this vigorous, shrewd young man was at the helm. The answer to the question, "Who cares?" was -- for the first time since Roosevelt -- "the President," and this for a democracy (as both men realized) is absolutely indispensable.

Yet, if the Kennedy Presidency was in this sense a commitment, it was also, in another sense, a liberation. For, beyond the politics and the policies, there was the style of the man, so genuinely and refreshingly contemporary. Norman Mailer glimpsed this in his famous post-Convention piece in Esquire, where he saluted Kennedy for uniting in his person two long-divergent currents in American life: the current of traditional public life, with all its debilitating conventions, and the "underground" stream of the dream life hitherto confined to our books, music and movies. "The rich are different from you and me," said Scott Fitzgerald (another Ivy League Irishman), and in Kennedy's case it came happily true. He was a millionaire who cared not a whit for money, a war hero with no respect for generals (real or arm-chair), an intellectual with a contempt for pedantry, a political upstart who defied convention and reputation, a naturally gay man who realized that someone would have to be serious if the very possibility of joy were not to perish. "I looked

at the others," he said (explaining his decision to seek the Presidency), "and decided: Why not me?" Hatless, coatless, with a cigar in his hand unconcealed from the photographers (as were Truman's and Eisenhower's cigarettes), with his mug of a daughter cavorting on the White House lawn, with his loveliest of wives tramping among the ruins of Hellas, he resembled his predecessors less than he did a Renaissance prince -- Henry of Navarre perhaps, or the young Lorenzo de Medici portrayed in Macchiavelli's history. Magnifico he was, indeed, and the miracle was that he was our freely chosen leader in a democracy whose imperfections are so often all too evident.

As a President, he was (in Willy Brandt's simple phrase) our hope "for a just peace and a better life." As a man -- shining Jack, golden in aspect, silver in wit, the grace of God upon him -- he was our beau ideal. Long will our weeping continue; but we would be false to his work, I think, if we were now to assume that all is over, all is settled, that we must passively wait another five, ten or twenty years to find his like and raise him up.

As ever,  
  
Anatole Shub