



**What if Kennedy Had Lived?(Editorial Desk)(if John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated)(Column).** Sean Wilentz.  
*The New York Times* (Nov 21, 2003 pA31 col 03 (18 col): pA31.

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Some years after John F. Kennedy's assassination 40 years ago tomorrow -- a counter-Camelot myth took hold among historians and journalists. Supposedly, Kennedy was a reckless cold warrior, knee-deep in conspiracies against Fidel Castro. On domestic policy, he was timid and ineffective.

According to the myth, the only good that came from Kennedy's presidency, except for his handling of the Cuban missile crisis, was achieved by Lyndon B. Johnson. Amid a wave of sympathy after Kennedy's death, Johnson used his political savvy to pass the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Johnson, the master politician, really mattered. The feckless Kennedy did not -- except as a romanticized martyr.

Those claims are false, as abundant historical evidence shows. Yet the counter-Camelot myth lives. Its distortions are particularly severe regarding race and civil rights.

By November 1963, Kennedy, displaying genuine political courage, had firmly committed his administration to the civil rights cause. This was a great shift from 1961 and the early months of 1962, when he regarded civil rights protesters with a mixture of skepticism and annoyance. A great deal had happened since then to change Kennedy's mind: the bloody battle over the desegregation of the University of Mississippi; violent official repression by white racists like Bull Connor, the public safety commissioner of Birmingham, Ala.; and the peaceful civil rights march on Washington in August 1963, followed days later by the deadly Ku Klux Klan bombing of a black church in Birmingham.

The president came to grasp the magnitude of the change in the national mood. On June 11, 1963, he delivered on national television a remarkable address that declared civil rights a moral issue "as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution."

White House tapes from the time -- recently collected in "Kennedy, Johnson and the Quest for Justice" by Jonathan Rosenberg and Zachary Karabell -- show that Kennedy backed up his words with action: a civil rights bill more sweeping than any since the era of Reconstruction. Kennedy himself privately described its main provisions, to ensure equal access to public accommodations, as not at all "tough." But he wanted a bill that could pass Congress -- expecting that more would come after he won re-election and Democrats favoring civil rights gained larger Congressional majorities.

"You know this fight is going to go on," Kennedy told the Rev. Eugene Carson Blake of the National Council of Churches on Sept. 30, 1963. "We're going to have, about two years from now, we're going to have another bill."

Kennedy's civil rights commitments cost him dearly at the time, especially in the white South. Still, at his death his overall approval rating stood at 58 percent, the highest recorded, then or

since, by an American president at that point in his term.

There's no question that Johnson was able to carry forward Kennedy's domestic agenda because of the 37 House seats gained by the Democrats in the 1964 elections, a landslide that produced a working majority for progressive legislation for the first time in a quarter century. But Kennedy was a more popular figure than Johnson. Had Kennedy lived to run against Barry Goldwater, the Democrats probably would have picked up 50 more liberal legislators.

Kennedy might even have won passage of his civil rights bill before the 1964 landslide. (Less than a month before he died, the bill was approved by the House Judiciary Committee.) But with a strong personal mandate and an invigorated Democratic Congress, there's little question he would have won it in 1965. In time, he would also have won the Voting Rights Act, which he had envisaged before his death.

As for foreign policy, Kennedy probably would not have Americanized the war in Vietnam, as Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy on reflection have conceded. After the missile crisis, he was embarked on a course to wind down the cold war and stop nuclear testing and proliferation.

If Kennedy had been finishing his second term in 1968, it is difficult to imagine the political resurrection of the two-time loser Richard Nixon. But with Kennedy dead, Nixon won the White House by following a Southern strategy that inflamed the reaction against Johnson's Great Society programs and exploited the national divisions over Vietnam. Without Nixon's Southern strategy, it is in turn difficult to imagine the consolidation of the hard-line Southern Republican conservatism that later proved so essential to the election of Ronald Reagan and, even more, George W. Bush. Kennedy's death changed everything.

**Source Citation:** Wilentz, Sean. "What if Kennedy Had Lived?(Editorial Desk)(if John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated)(Column)." *The New York Times* (Nov 21, 2003 pA31 col 03 (18 col): A31. *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center*. Gale. Cherry Creek High School. 27 Apr. 2008  
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**Gale Document Number:**A110376931

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