

Thirty-Five Years After the Assassination Assessing JFK

An Interview with Hugh Sidey

Public Perspective (PP): In the following pages we bring together polling data on what the public has said about Kennedy and his presidency, from his contest with Nixon in 1960 on through to present-day retrospectives. We want to talk with you about your personal assessments of Kennedy, based on your extensive coverage of him for *Time* from 1958 on through the assassination. Would you begin by reviewing for our readers what you thought of Kennedy's presidency at the time.

Hugh Sidey (HS): There is little question that we in the reporting trade were very pro-Kennedy—probably a little too much so. Part of this was due to the generational

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change going on at that time. The Eisenhower presidency was winding down. These were the people who not only helped to win the War but also set up the post-war world. Now, starting with Eisenhower, they were getting old, and there was a whole bunch of young GIs, among them John Kennedy, who had fought in the War in the lesser ranks, who had new ideas about the world. That caught on with many of us younger journalists. There isn't any question about it. I suspect that we violated some of the normal rules of objectivity and fairness.

Kennedy was our age. He was fun. He was exciting. He was intellectually stimulating. His speeches were different from those we had been hearing. They were filled with historical references. The 1960 campaign became for us a referendum on the old guard—represented by Nixon even though he wasn't old. And a referendum on the “new” John Kennedy, and on the steamroller that the Kennedy brothers had constructed and used to deliver a *coup de gras* on the Democratic party's old guard. Adlai Stevenson, Stuart Symington, and Lyndon Johnson were all left on the sidelines. For many of us in the press, this was exhilarating. So as I say, we were quite pro-Kennedy, and when he won it verified for us his natural superiority.

When he got into the White House, well, it was an amazing year. Here is this new president, and he comes in on this marvelous spectacle of the Great Blizzard of 1960. The Capitol Plaza is white and the people are there, and the steam from their breaths, and the city half paralyzed but in a party mood. Kennedy gave that marvelous address, and Robert Frost read his poem. We came into the new world with the highest hopes. I have to give credit to Kennedy; he had a sense of romance about the job that none of the other eight presidents I've covered had. He was out there on a stage with Roosevelt, Churchill, and de Gaulle; he was playing to history.

But after that wonderful upbeat inauguration, trouble began. First off, the Soviets put Yuri Gagarin into space; we were kind of humiliated because of failures in our rocketry. Then came the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion and the recriminations that followed. Close on came the pressure on Berlin. The Russians began shutting down our ground access. Kennedy went off to Vienna where Khrushchev threatened him and pounded on the table. Kennedy's back was sore. Then the Berlin Wall. And in the fall of 1961, we learned that the Soviets had tested those huge hydrogen bombs, which we didn't think they would have for another five or six years.

So, really, those first nine months of Kennedy's presidency were one disaster after another. Oddly enough, Kennedy's popularity improved in that time. And I have to say as I look back, he was quite manly and upfront about the problems. There were no illusions about them. In the Bay of Pigs debacle, the Kennedy Administration tried to phony the record a bit, but after awhile Kennedy stepped up, took responsibility, and acknowledged it was a disaster. He was also candid about the Berlin situation. When asked why he didn't do something about the Berlin Wall, he said that it was just too risky. Echoing in his mind all the time was that speech by Khrushchev, who said it was the Soviets' right to foment revolution around the world and have small wars to promote their cause. Kennedy had to come through all of that. I remember at the end of the summer or the early fall that year of 1961, talking on the phone with Jack's father, former Ambassador Joseph Kennedy. And I remember Joe Kennedy saying, “I'll tell you, Jack is the luckiest kid in all the world.” He went on, “He always has been, and he still is. He can fall into a pile of dung and come up with a rose.” I said, “What do you mean, Mr. Ambassador?” He said, “Well, he's

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learned the most valuable lessons a president can learn, and he's learned most of them in this first year. You wait and see, he learns quickly." I think he did.

So I have to say that along with his decision to build up our defense forces and to go to the moon, his grappling with the Civil Rights upheavals and all of that, I thought his performance as president was just first rate.

PP: Thirty-five years later, have you changed your mind on anything?

HS: Well, I've changed my mind about him—about a personal dimension. That has to do with the sex thing again and his obvious affairs and his preoccupation with sex while he was on duty. I have to acknowledge that while I was there covering the White House, there was a lot of circumstantial evidence on this. But we were so busy with the Cold War crises that we just didn't pursue it. Besides, the state of mind in the media at the time was not to pursue it—not to poke and prod.

Did our looking away lead to problems? I never saw his escapades get in the way of his being president. Now, things have come out that I didn't have a clue about then. It's not very comforting to learn that one of his girlfriends was a friend of Giancana—which might have left the president open to blackmail, or some kind of pressure in any way. That is dangerous.

So I have to say that my assessment of him as a man has gone down. That's disappointing. I feel that anyone who accepts this great honor of being president—and after all that's what it is—has to pay the nation back. Of course he works for it—I understand that. He spends a huge amount of time and energy; he connives and plans and works; and then he wins it. But, nevertheless, I view it as this country's turning over the most remarkable political office that

man has devised. With that we entrust him to hold our honor; to manage our wealth well; to be courageous, bold; to be disciplined; to be a symbol, an image. We expect all of that—and here he failed us, though we didn't know it. That's an important failing of his leadership.

I look back on it now and think we were in a little window between the modern world as we see it now, and the old world where we didn't divulge personal transgressions. I think it was getting dangerous, to be honest with you. The rumors were there. Too many of us knew some of the young girls around the White House who were quite plainly involved with Kennedy. I don't think it could have lasted much longer. The media were changing; the world was changing.

But for that moment, I have to say, it was a little like the Wizard of Oz. Here's Kennedy behind the screens pulling the levers—and you have this great spectacle out front that's working very well. And behind the screen, he has this private life that we didn't know much about. In the eyes of God, that's probably pretty bad. On the basis of secular political power, I guess if it works, it works: That old phrase, "In politics the only thing that succeeds is success."

The public perception of a leader is terribly important. On some days it may be the largest part of his leadership. In his time, Kennedy projected an image of an honorable and upright president. Rumors flew about his marriage, of course, but nothing concrete, no confessions, no books. He seemed to be a diligent and caring father. The contemporary image or perception of his presidency was one of upholding American values, and providing good strong leadership in a very difficult time.

PP: I understand your point about the presidency and its essential responsibilities in moral leadership of the country. Looking at the substance of the decisions of the Kennedy administration now 35 years later, do you have any major dissents?

HS: I do not. I think by and large, aside from the Bay of Pigs debacle, they were very good. To begin with, he saw the dimensions of the Cold War. Eisenhower saw them too, but he was a little tired at the end. Kennedy's decision to streamline and beef up our national defense was absolutely correct. So was his decision to go to the moon: He saw

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it as a contest, not only of technology but really a political contest, and he was right. We've had immense benefits from his decision. And then of course the Civil Rights revolution had begun. Kennedy's response was based on a true feeling about equality and the need to act. Maybe he can be faulted for having been dragged into it, but 1961 and 1962 was a busy time. Montgomery, and "Bull" Connor down there in Birmingham,

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and Oxford, Mississippi—he did confront it. I think he began to understand it better and he made progress.

The new economics—it was not voted until after his death, of course, but he listened to Walter Heller. We had a tax cut in a time of minor recession, to stimulate the economy. There's some of that in Ronald Reagan's world. The war on poverty was voted under Lyndon Johnson, but it was conceived under Kennedy. Then there was the American University speech in which after the triumph of the Cuban Missile Crisis he held up the hand of friendship to Khrushchev and said we should not be adversaries in this world; we should work together. I look back through the policies, and I suppose you could quarrel here and there, but I must say I find them as sound today as I found them back then.

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PP: Is Vietnam an exception?

HS: No. Again I don't fault him. That became Lyndon Johnson's war. It's a subject I talked with Kennedy about on several occasions. At that time he was a good deal upset with Henry Luce and the *Time* publications, because we were advocates of standing firm in Southeast Asia. He had met with General MacArthur twice. I think he'd seen him once in New York, and then again in Washington. Both times MacArthur had urged Kennedy not to get into a land war in Central Asia. Kennedy had related this to me in a kind of state of anguish. He called in Generals Ridgway and Krulak and others who had fought there, and they gave him the same advice.

Yet there was a quality to Kennedy, as I am sure you're aware, in which he wanted to be a tough guy. He didn't want to lose. He loved the idea of being macho. So, he was torn by these two emotions. His mind was telling him to be wary, and his ego was saying he needed to step up there. I am convinced that the whole thing would have been resolved ultimately quite differently under Kennedy than it was under Johnson. I felt that Johnson didn't understand war, was suspicious of those who advised him, and got trapped. He didn't want to be the first president to lose a war. He had no man he could trust to tell him—just drop it and get out—until the end with Clark Clifford. I think Kennedy would have found some other way after the initial reverses.

PP: So that may be one of the most tragic consequences of the Kennedy assassination?

HS: It could be. Yes, absolutely. As you know, there are many other things. I think the assassination pushed politics back a generation. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon had been bypassed by the system. We were ready to move into a new generation—and then Kennedy was killed and suddenly we were back with Johnson and Nixon. Still, it's probably correct that the most tragic consequences of the assassination is that the war Kennedy started took on a life of its own under Johnson and became this tragedy of Vietnam.

PP: What's the verdict on the Kennedy presidency set against American historical experience? That's a huge question, but as you know and have written, the presidency is such a vital office in our national experience. What's our proper verdict?

HS: Well, I think we need to divide it up a little here. If you take his leadership, international and national, it was excellent. I would give him an "A." Considering all the problems he confronted and the short time in which he had to act, the cultural changes that we were experiencing, the burden of trying to manage the Free World—I thought he behaved marvelously and the results are there to see. Moreover, the image of Kennedy was first rate. He was the man of intellect, eloquence, and compassion, the Irishman who had risen up to become head of the country. All of that played well then and was important. It was very good.

Now, the third element of the assessment is, of course, the history afterwards. And in Kennedy's case this is personal and has to do with his careless pursuit of women and sex. It's a black mark. I think you can trace the roots of Clinton's own problems, at least in part, back to the idea that Kennedy did it, and therefore it's all right. Kennedy could get away with it. As a matter of fact, I had a couple of young candidates when

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I was actively writing my column on the presidency come in to see me. One of them I remember—they had studied Kennedy and were basing much of their campaigns on his style—said in effect that his opponents were accusing him of being a womanizer, but it seemed to help Kennedy and so he didn't mind. Well, that fellow was wiped off the electoral map; I've never heard of him since. But I think this idea—after Kennedy's death, mind you—got abroad and has poisoned our politics.

PP: A president is a teacher in ways that extend beyond his own lifetime.

HS: Absolutely. Again, when I say we hand him all of this honor and glory, we expect a president to be disciplined and try to live up to the nation's ideals. I think Kennedy was selfish and narrow-minded and didn't live up to them. That has diminished his presidency.

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I have to say, though, that there's another level of morality—if you can define it this way—where Kennedy fared well. Remember the book he wrote, *Profiles in Courage*. It was about people who stood against the tide in very tough times and cast those votes when it was hard to do it and sacrificed themselves for what they believed was right. Aside from Kennedy's personal problem, I put him in the “profiles” category; some of the stands that he took were indeed courageous and, I think, based on his feeling of what was best for the country. There wasn't any great clamor to go to the moon, but Kennedy could look ten years down the road and see that if we didn't do it and the Soviets did, we've got troubles. It was the same with civil rights. George Wallace and his ilk were powerful in those days. The US Senate was not really sympathetic to civil rights, but Kennedy laid it on the line. And the same was true with the pursuit of the war on poverty and environmental matters—he was out in front. So there is a level of “national morality” that he held up well. It was, again, his personal image that I think just diminished him.

PP: Presidential character—not referring to [James David] Barber's writing on the subject, but in general—is critically important. In many regards, as you see it, Kennedy looked pretty good in terms of presidential character.

HS: Well that's it. It's so complicated; you get into so many things. You're absolutely right in the terms we've defined it—his stands in Congress, his speeches, how he confronted the problems of the world and that sort of thing—Kennedy's presidential character looked good and was good. It's just this personal matter. I have to say that I think that if Dallas never happened, his personal failings would have hurt him as president. We can't ignore morality and character in the presidency. It's just

got to be there in some dimension. It's very hard for anyone to lead a crusade for the salvation and the restitution of the American family, and do what Kennedy did and what Clinton has obviously done. This is a very serious leadership issue.

PP: Your sense is that even though one can never determine this kind of thing, had Kennedy lived he might have experienced the collapse that the Clinton presidency has experienced?

HS: Yes I do. For instance, supposing Dallas had never happened, it's quite apparent that he would have been re-elected. But two years after his death, which would have been about a year and a half into a second term, is when Frank Church launched those Intelligence Committee hearings. Senator Church found the phone records from Giancana to the White House. Now if that whole thing had broken at that time—with Kennedy still posturing as the faithful husband to Jackie Kennedy, the kids growing up, and an election coming on—there's no telling what would have happened. The country would have been shocked back then, more so than in today's world. A more permissive generation had not yet bloomed as it has now; outcry would have been great. Given Kennedy's popularity and achievements, he might have survived. But I wouldn't rule out such an outrage that he would have been made a cripple for the rest of his presidency, if not forced to resign.



Hugh Sidey first joined Time Magazine in 1958. He served as chief of the Magazine's Washington Bureau from 1969 to 1978, and since then has been a Washington Bureau contributing editor.