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John T. Sullivan

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The Difference One Man Makes:
A Look at Presidential Power and What Could Have Been

By

John T. Sullivan

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Dr. Barbara Brown
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A question often posed in theoretical discussions is whether or not one person can make a difference in the ebb and flow of history. We might all agree that if that one person were a President of the United States, a difference could be made; but how much? While the presidency is the single most powerful position in the U.S. federal system of government, making it a formidable force in world affairs also, most scholars agree that the presidency, itself, is very limited, structurally. The success of a president in setting the nation along a desired course rests with the ingredients brought to the position by the person elected to it. Further, many events occur outside the control of the president. Fortune or failure depends upon how the individual in office reacts to these variables. The truest test of presidential skills come when a president is caught in a maelstrom of historic episodes. In essence, this is the subject of this paper.

Specifically, I propose to study the policy setting powers of President Kennedy and the differences that his abilities could have made to history had he not been assassinated. President Kennedy governed in a time that was crucial to our nation's progression, and he was cut down before he could fully leave his imprint upon our country's heritage. This project deals with the power of presidents in setting national policy by analyzing the potential alternate reality that this man could have set forth had the course of human events allowed. In this, I shall focus on Kennedy's personal power in setting

national policy and the probable approach that he would have taken to events that engulfed his successors. In the end, I hope to solidify the argument that one person can make a difference though the disparity between our history and the potential reality set forth in this project.

PRESIDENTIAL POWER

The power of the President of the United States to influence events around him has rapidly evolved in the last century-- especially since Franklin Roosevelt inhabited the White House. Today, much as it always has, a president's power "is the product of his vantage points in government, together with his reputation in the Washington community and his prestige outside" (Neustadt 131). The vantage points to which Richard Neustadt referred to in his excellent book, Presidential Power, have grown considerably in the last half of a century with the massive growth of governmental bureaucracy since Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1932. This has proven to be both a positive and a negative for White House occupants in their attempts to exercise executive control of national policy.

The presidency is an institution that shares power with other forces in creating and implementing a national agenda. Presidential power "exists only as a potential. Leadership is the means by which the president can exploit that potential" (Shogan 5). Structurally, the president must contend with

Congress to achieve policies through legislation and ratification of foreign policies, though Congress has strongly deferred this latter power to the President since World War II. But even with that concession, "great successes in U.S. foreign policy tend to come in those areas in which there is a consensus and thus a continuity in policy" (Ambrose 123). Further, the press often serves as "the fourth branch of government", and much can be achieved through their cooperation (Neustadt 26). The President's cause becomes to persuade all of these differing people that the President's cause should be their own (Neustadt 27). Of this constant political burden, British journalist Godfrey Hodgson said:

Never has any one office had so much power as the president of the United States possesses. Never has so powerful a leader been so impotent to do what he wants to do, and what he is pledged to do, what he is expected to do, and what he knows he must do (Shogan 5).

However, even with these limitations, the President remains the pivotal power broker in the nation. With the President's powers of veto, appointments, access to the media, budgeting, commander-in-chief, and head of the nation's bureaucratic machine, to name just a few, a President commands the most impressive array of persuasive vantage points in the American system (Neustadt). Through this potential for persuasion also comes the power of bargaining with the many elements that share power with the President, thus allowing him the capability of

controlling the tempest of politics in his favor for specific agenda goals. In setting this agenda, there are still many other factors that influence the success of a chief executive.

A President's image in Washington, D.C. often will determine whether or not he can achieve the results he deems necessary, but that image is a constantly fluctuating market in Washington where other power brokers can position themselves for or against the White House successfully, depending upon how the market favors the President. In this, lies a very simple axiom: "The men he would persuade must be convinced in their own minds that he has skill and will enough to use his advantages" (Neustadt 44). Neustadt further goes to say that the "greatest danger to a President's potential influence is not the show of incapacity he shows today, but its apparent kinship . . . to form a pattern." This would undermine confidence in the chief executive, and it would stymie his policy setting potential.

Similarly, much of the same concept relates to people outside of Washington, D.C. The average citizen is much more insulated from the market value of Presidential influence than political insiders. But when the people do become affected by it, the result can be staggering. When people feel their everyday lives touched directly by the machinations of the President, true power can be irrevocably wielded or lost. The abilities that each person brings to this challenge are the determinants of success.

In his book, The Riddle of Power, Robert Shogan outlines

three major ingredients to evaluating Presidential power: the ideology, the values, and the character of the person in the Oval Office. Much like a recipe, an amiable mix of these components is necessary to success in White House. The ideology of a President provides a "broad philosophical framework for deciding which policy goals matter most, . . . a strategy that allows him to achieve these goals" (Shogan 6). Values provide the moral epicenter for the President, and they are much more deeply rooted in the foundation of the person than is the ideology. Shogan says that the values are responsible for the personal conduct of the President. "Character is the catalyst that melds a president's ideology and values into his vision for the country, which is the expression of his leadership" (Shogan 7). They are the person's "temperament" and "inclinations" when in office (Shogan 7). The formation of these elements to form the Presidential puzzle are integral to the success of the President. If facing a crucial test, a serious weakness in any of these areas can break both the Presidency and the man holding it.

JOHN F. KENNEDY: THE ERA

In order to visualize the potential impact that President Kennedy could^{have} left upon history, we must first look at the era during and after which he was President. The 1960's were much perceived to be a time of renewal and change. Kennedy was a

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symbol of this, himself, because he was such a contrast to his predecessor, President Eisenhower, both in age and leadership style, as he ushered in the new decade.

President Kennedy, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, Profiles in Courage, adequately described a major issue of the time as the "seemingly unending war to which we have given the curious epithet 'cold'. . ." The complex global contest between the Communist Soviet Union and the United States directly, or peripherally, dominated almost all aspects of the United States' foreign policy. Most significant amongst the era's foreign policy commitments were: circumventing Cuba as a threat to national security through the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, protecting Western Europe from Soviet aggression during the building of the Berlin Wall, checking Communist influence in Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Indonesia, and, most notably, Vietnam, and balancing a determined military posture with the threat of nuclear war in the high stakes poker game played between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The debilitating effect of the Vietnam conflict upon the American prestige and psyche was decisively the most disastrous setback for U.S. foreign policy in the 20th Century, and its scars deeply rooted in a whole generation.

On the domestic side, the U.S. was a growing powder keg of tensions that eventually wreaked havoc within the social and political mainstream. Civil Rights, which was an important

issue at home for the Kennedy administration, led to landmark legislation in 1964 and 1965. The "war" on poverty was a further outgrowth of the Kennedy tenure that became the bulwark of the Johnson era that proceeded it. Finally, bitter public dissent over the nation's involvement in Vietnam coupled with general anger and disillusionment over the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy literally tore apart the fabric of national order. So vehement was this discord, that nearly all of the achievements of the Johnson administration were overshadowed and the President was engulfed in a sea of discontent that prompted him not to seek re-election.

JOHN F. KENNEDY: THE MAN

In order to further discern the differences that Kennedy might have made, we must determine what kind of power skills JFK brought to the Oval Office and how he commanded them. In his approach to the political scene, Kennedy described himself as an "idealist without illusions" (Harper 12). Robert Shogan sets forth the premise that President Kennedy analyzed issues in three ways:

The first was the definition of an issue in terms that the public readily understood. Second was the establishment of realistic goals, taking into account the position of his adversaries. And finally, the commitment to presidential prestige and popularity to the struggle to

attain these goals (Shogan 80).

Though a romantic and idealist at heart, President Kennedy disdained emotional responses or overreactions. Often, in the heat of crisis that each president inevitably faces, such responses are inadvertently unveiled. "In all such situations it appears that Kennedy was cool, collected, courteous, and terse. This does not mean that he was unemotional. . .But he had schooled his temperament" (Neustadt 155).

This Kennedy is much different from the pop culture mainstream that has today bestowed near legendary status upon him. Though his eloquent rhetoric was an instrument that inspired an entire nation and caught the eye of the world, his exercise of power was far more suited to rationalism than idealism. Kennedy operated his White House through a consistent pattern: the convening of a command post for critical evaluation of the situation at hand, hard questioning and conception of all possible options, maintenance of strict silence, and a decision made by the President alone (Neustadt 152). He was determined never to react overzealously to any given situation even if he had the power to do so. Many claimed that his cautious approach towards the exercise of his powers was a betrayal of the bold, decisive figure he portrayed during his campaign for office.

Indeed, as President Kennedy learned to "master the machine" (Neustadt 151), he became more confident and understood how to adapt in order avoid repeating mistakes. Kennedy viewed

"the conservative outlook of the Congress and his slender election victory in 1960" (Harper 17) as serious constraints upon substantive opportunities for domestic achievements. In contrast, he "ran foreign policy almost without reference to Congress" (Ambrose 125). Nonetheless, by his third year, many felt that he had undergone "a transformation from a hesitant leader with unsure goals to a strong figure with deeply appealing objectives" (Harper 14). Further, his hard lesson learned in the Bay of Pigs may have enabled him to muster the determination necessary during the Cuban Missile crisis, and the lessons of that victory may have paved the way towards his highly recognized Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union.

Wary of pressing too hard in his early years, he commented that "Great innovations should not be forced on slender majorities" (Harper 12). In his memorable work, A Thousand Days, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. noted that President Kennedy looked forward to a second term in that it "would give . . . the congressional margin and the popular mandate the first had lacked. He saw his second administration. . . as the time of great legislative action." It would be fair to say that Kennedy's approach in his first two years could have been cautious to an extreme and definitely enough to anger many--especially those involved in civil rights. Regardless, "the distinctive quality of Kennedy's leadership--the interplay of the self-discipline that marked his character, the rationality that reflected his values, and finally, his ability to adjust

his ideology" were the central skills that John F. Kennedy brought to the Oval Office (Shogan 99). He, himself, offered this reflection upon power at Amherst College in 1963:

The men who create power create an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness, but the men who question power. . .determine whether we use power or power uses us.

This simple statement is powerfully symbolic of the reflective, rational approach towards power that Kennedy exhibited in his time in office.

JOHN F. KENNEDY: THE MISSED CHALLENGES

Given that President Kennedy planned to run for re-election, many pivotal challenges awaited him had he not been assassinated. Most significant amongst the issues Kennedy would have faced were his pending bills dealing with civil rights and tax reduction, implementing a still formulating strategy to combat poverty, re-election, more widespread installment of his New Economics, and what would have been, as Robert Shogan called it, "the acid test of Kennedy's ability to lead"--Vietnam. To speculate on much more would be haphazard in that how JFK would have dealt with these issues could have spurred challenges incalculable to us today. However, concerning this particular range of items, I believe that it is possible to lay a framework for Kennedy's lost presidency.

In the area of civil rights, I propose that President Kennedy would have successfully followed through on a comprehensive agenda, though possibly at a slower rate than President Lyndon Johnson did in our reality. That JFK was an ardent supporter of civil rights was never a question. What can reasonably be said about his approach to this issue was that President Kennedy saw civil rights within the context of the broad political landscape. Kennedy's approach was consistent with his standard method:

First. . .he established clear goals. In the case of civil rights, it was nothing less than the use of federal power to strike down legal defenses of segregation. . .Then he defined the problem, using the most forceful language ever heard from an American president on the subject of race. . .Finally, Kennedy used his prestige to mobilize public support and the backing of other national leaders. . .

(Shogan 98).

Kennedy was careful not to push too hard with his civil rights agenda in fear that he would alienate his Southern support for other issues and re-election (Brauer 316-17). Finally, the racial equality movement "overwhelmed him" and "forced him to amend" his political approach (Harper 225). Comprehensive civil rights legislation was finally introduced to Congress in February of 1963 by the President as the culmination of his methodical path towards racial equality.

While this legislation came to be known as the historic

Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed by President Johnson and his political machinations, it is likely that President Kennedy would have accomplished the same feat. His commitment to its passage was firm. Kennedy commented that his "political fortunes were riding on the legislation" (Brauer 273). Richard Neustadt came to the conclusion that JFK "came to see the risks of social alienation as plainly as he saw the risks of nuclear escalation." Kennedy insider, Schlesinger concurred by emphasizing that by the time of his assassination, his commitment to civil rights was as vehement as that for peace. Even "those closest to the legislative process" later believed that Kennedy would have pushed the civil rights bill through (Brauer 310). As a matter of fact, Senate Minority Leader, Everett Dirksen claimed that "its time had come", and Carl Albert said that "it would have been adopted in essentially the same form whether Kennedy lived or died" (Schlesinger 1030).

In the area of civil rights, it is likely that an extended Kennedy administration would have gone down in history, albeit kicking and dragging along the way, as possibly the most comprehensive advocate of racial equality since Abraham Lincoln. Through language expressed before the introduction of the civil rights bill, indications are that a Kennedy administration would have likewise followed up with something comparable to Johnson's Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Brauer, Schlesinger). Further, as it was, the Kennedy administration set unprecedented standards in minority appointments and executive action, specifically

through the fierce administration of discrimination prosecutions under Attorney General Robert Kennedy. There is no reason to assume that the Attorney General would not have been retained for a second term in order to reinforce and broaden the efforts made in the area of civil rights. Similarly, it is likely that with victories in the legislature and a possible re-election, JFK would possibly have opened the door a bit more for minority appointments. With a greater margin of victory and more congressional allies, Kennedy would have become the full fledged usher, instead of the martyr, of what Carl Brauer called the "Second Reconstruction."

In the less glamorous, but all important, area of economic policy, the Kennedy administration was implementing a concept that was dubbed "New Economics" (Harper). This "pro-Keynesian" approach for government called for a "policy (that) would now be devoting to curing the ills" of the nation in a proactive fashion (Harper 183 & 195). This new form of economic stimulus called for spurring the economy through its expansion and through tax relief and tax reform. In theory, this government action would increase prosperity. Kennedy, himself, was not fully convinced of the theories of the New Economists until "mid 1962" (Harper 195). By this time, JFK, as in his approach to civil rights, had become more independent and willing to take such risks. What ensued was the beginning of the Revenue Act of 1964.

In 1963, President Kennedy introduced legislation that

eventually passed in 1964 under Lyndon Johnson that was called the Revenue Act of 1964. I propose that President Kennedy had already made the effective sale of the legislation before his death, and with the opportunity, the possible result could have been greater economic growth in the 1960's. As shown by Herb Gebelein, the 1960's did show moderate growth (Harper 187-91). Heavy expenditures on the Vietnam effort in the Johnson era retarded the growth of the economy and undermined the tax cut forwarded by the Kennedy administration by increasing inflation (Harper 186). Though the economic success under Johnson was praised, Phillip M. Simpson argues that "Kennedy would have at least rivaled Johnson's record" (Harper 204).

In all fairness, economics is a dangerous tiger to ride, and to say that Kennedy would definitely have bettered Johnson in economic policies is folly. What is definite is that President Kennedy believed his economic agenda to be his most important domestic issue, affecting all others--including civil rights, and he would have vigorously pursued a most assured victory of his legislation had he lived (Harper & Schlesinger). Likely, he would have continued this policy in a consistent manner throughout his presidency. However, because of his absence, the concept was allowed to "idle" (Harper 180). Further, akin as it was to Reaganomics, "there has been growing doubt about whether such a project can be sustained" (Harper 180). Ronald King calls Kennedy's economic policies "a beacon of inspired if aborted achievement", and this achievement would

have been on a course to continue (Harper 180).

As for the matter of re-election, I feel it safe to say that President Kennedy had little to worry about. As Schlesinger noted, "He had little doubt. . .that he would win the election with ease, especially against (Senator Barry) Goldwater." With probable victories in civil rights and a popular tax cut included in the Revenue Act added to his maturation in foreign policy (Cuban missile crisis and Nuclear Test Ban Treaty), Kennedy would have had many arms to bear against the right wing extremist, Goldwater. I doubt, however, that President Kennedy would have won by the sweeping margin that Johnson did in reality. Though Kennedy skillfully avoided alienating the South wing of his party with civil rights, he would have lost some to the conservative Goldwater that Johnson, because of his Southern heritage, did not. Also, LBJ masterfully played Kennedy's death on the political stage as to get all he could out of it. Of course, JFK would not have had such raw emotion on his side. In the end, however, Kennedy likely would have won handily and received the mandate and congressional support he needed to begin his "term of legislative action" (Schlesinger 1016). From that platform, Kennedy was to launch his poverty programs and Medicare proposals that had been formulated for 1964 (Schlesinger 1010-14), but which, instead became the pillars of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

No doubt, the most asked question concerning a theoretical second term of John F. Kennedy is "Would he have gotten out

of Vietnam?" Though this is by no means an easy question to answer, given the approach President Kennedy appeared to display in dealing with such matters, I believe that American involvement in Vietnam would have been reduced and, eventually, would have ended during a second Kennedy term. The fact that President Kennedy was committed to keeping Communism out of Southeast Asia was indisputable. Much effort had been made to prevent Communism from rising to power in neighboring Laos (Schlesinger 320-42). As a matter of fact, Vietnam was not even a foreign policy priority until the end of his time in office (Rust). Most likely, President Kennedy would not have made any firm decisions on Vietnam until after the 1964 election, as did Johnson, in order to stave a falling out as a result of any bold action (Rust 181).

Following his probable re-election, Kennedy was to face no tougher decision than to decide upon the escalation or de-escalation of U.S. troops and aid to Vietnam. Under his tenure, he had already increased personnel from 2,000 to 16,000 in his efforts to support the South Vietnamese government. The assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, the head of the South Vietnamese government, only three weeks before his own death, disturbed Kennedy more than anything since the Bay of Pigs (Schlesinger 997). In November of 1963, the President asked his aide for the Far East, Michael Forrestal, to prepare a study on Vietnam options which would include the option of withdrawal. Shogan, at this point says that "he believed that the U.S. had

a commitment to that country, but he was determined to keep that commitment limited." Like under Johnson, I believe that JFK would have put off firm commitment until it was no longer possible.

In the Summer of 1964, in response to aggression by Communists, President Johnson pressed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress, giving the President a wide range of deferred military options. "Many congressmen later claimed they had been tricked" into voting for this measure (Ambrose 126). It would have been highly unlikely that Kennedy would have approved of such a rash response to the incident in the Gulf. It would have been very uncharacteristic of his rational, unemotional approach to such matters. Later, in 1965, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, the same men who served Kennedy, confronted President Johnson with the prospect that a decision had to be made about Vietnam. It is very possible that the same recommendation, around the same time frame would have been made to Kennedy if he were around.

By this time, it had become apparent that U.S. policy in Vietnam was not working and that between major escalation or withdrawal, a path had to be chosen. Here, I believe that President Kennedy would have decided not to escalate American involvement. As Richard Neustadt suggests:

Given his age, experience, and temperament, . . . given the advantages in our domestic politics accorded to a man

who had faced down Khrushchev. . .I think he would have kept his bombers and his combat troops away.

Similarly, William Rust states in his book, Kennedy in Vietnam, that he "would not have crossed the covert action-advisory threshold, would not have bombed North Vietnam, and would not have committed U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam." Finally, as Robert Shogan points out:

For Kennedy not to have withdrawn these men, once he became convinced that continued U.S. support for Vietnam would mean an open-ended commitment for more troops, would have fundamentally contradicted the rational approach to ideology he had developed.

CONCLUSIONS

Though we shall never be granted the opportunity to fully know what actions John F. Kennedy might have taken after November 22, 1963, I have tried to set forth some plausible hypotheses. In doing so, I have attempted to illuminate the powers of the presidency and the differences that one person can make in their approach to it through the example of President Kennedy. Through this example, I believe that one can definitely discern that substantial historical differences would have been made.

In the event that President Kennedy had lived, along with the information provided here, I submit that the ensuing alternate reality would bear little resemblance to the one we

know today. First, with JFK alive and re-elected, Lyndon Johnson would not have become President of the United States. Johnson had begun to fade into the shadows and contemplate retirement before JFK's death. Further, Kennedy, not Johnson, would be remembered for landmark legislation in domestic issues, though it is doubtful that Kennedy could, or would, have produced anywhere near the massive legislative agenda that Lyndon Johnson did in our reality. On the flip side, however, with Kennedy not committing the nation to the Vietnam conflict, the legislative achievements would not have been drowned out as were Johnson's. Chances are, though, that Kennedy's prestige would have been slightly tarnished for losing Southeast Asia to the Communists--as was Truman's for "losing" China. However, time would likely have cleared that up. Following the chain of events as best possible, many other differences become apparent.

Without a Vietnam to embroil and divide the nation, one cannot help but believe that, despite unforeseeable other factors, the nation would not have been as bitter a place come the end of President Kennedy's second term. Without a Johnson and Vietnam to run against, Robert Kennedy would not have been likely to run for President in 1968, nor would he have been killed after the California primary. Such assurances cannot concretely be made for Martin Luther King, Jr., however. With both Kennedys alive and out of the running, I would suggest that Hubert H. Humphrey would still have made a run in 1968 and would

have won. William Vanden Heuvel and Milton Gwirtzman in their book, On His Own: Robert F. Kennedy, stated that with RFK alive (despite popular opinion, Kennedy probably would not have won the nomination) Humphrey should have beaten Nixon. So, without Vietnam, the RFK assassination, the Chicago riots, and with a live, two term President, I ,too, believe that the Democrats would have won in 1968. Beyond that, not much can be certain. I am sure, obviously, that without Nixon's election in 1968, that there would have been no Watergate. Without Watergate, there would not have been a President Ford, and likely, there would not have been a peanut farmer from Georgia to slide in on the wave of distrust of government. We would have probably, in my opinion, seen the nominations of Robert Kennedy and Ronald Reagan somewhere in time due to their unique statures, but whether they would have squared off against each or ever succeeded is impossible to conjecture.

In the end, I have tried to show a world where one man, serving at a crucial time in history, could seriously alter the course of events as we know them. Further, I have given examples of how the use of Presidential power can effectively serve as the means for that end. The office and its power is aptly described in Robert Shogan's words:

The president bestrides our political world like a contemporary Caesar, reaching into the nooks and crannies of our everyday existence. He can lead us into war, or economic ruin, or set us against each other. Or he can

help us resolve our differences and generate fresh
confidence and hope.

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