

Old pain, new hope

The bullet that ended the life of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, ended an era of innocence in this country and introduced one of sophistry.

Government is but one shade in the multi-colored cloth that forms a society; the fabric's underlying structure is the character of its people. It was these, the mores and values Americans had come to believe in, which were rent and torn, not because one man died, not because the man who died was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, but because the man was President of the United States of America.

Until Kennedy's assassination, most Americans then living in this country believed that we, as citizens of this great nation, had achieved a degree of civilization that precluded the possibility of presidential assassination. The shot that killed Kennedy shattered our illusion. In doing so, it made quibblers of us all. We became cynical, deceptive, faithless, equivocal, inconsistent; often we became absurd. Having lost faith in the idea we were superior to people of other countries, countries where violence is commonplace, we lost confidence in our basic values and, to a degree, in ourselves.

Possibly it is true that whenever a country's leader is a victim of violence, that society is plunged into a prolonged period of instability; morality collapses, good manners are ignored, and time-tested rules go by the board. Even though government remains stable, society does not.

Vice President Lyndon Johnson succeeded to the Presidency without a hitch. At no time was the nation threatened with an administrative void. The transition

was made without missing a congressional heartbeat. Snags, if there were any, were disposed of quickly and quietly while the mourning country focused its attention on surviving family, a series of incredible events befalling the accused killer who himself was assassinated while in police custody, and the question of whether a conspiracy existed.

Twenty years have passed since President Kennedy died in Dallas. A generation has passed through the schools and adolescence, fought in Vietnam, seen other presidents elected, seen one forced to resign in disgrace. A new generation has been born and is now maturing. To them the name Kennedy holds about the same significance as the name Lincoln.

This new generation has not experienced the disillusion their grandparents knew, nor the destabilization their parents felt, as children, when attitudes underwent fundamental changes. They are not, perhaps, as naive as those Americans of two decades ago; if not, it is well, for violently shattered illusions leave society in tatters.

Time, the healer, has taken twenty years to patch the holes in the fabric of American society. Slowly, seam by seam, the cloth grows whole again. Not without interruption, not without a rip here and a tear there, but even the most pessimistic feels and sees and senses growing strengths in our behaviors and attitudes.

The underlying structure has survived; over it, not still fragile, stretches civilization's lace. In a few more years, mores and values that made America a great nation will be woven together in a rich pattern and will form anew the strengthened character of our people.