What the Assassination of President Kennedy Meant to Americans in 1963

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The assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 remains a searing historical memory for most Americans over the age of 55, who can describe precisely where they were when they heard the shocking news from Dallas. The meaning Americans attached to the assassination and their reflections on Kennedy and the state of the country have been obscured by five decades of conspiracy theories, revelations about Kennedy's private life, and mixed evaluations of his presidency. Yet what Americans felt and thought in real time is evident in a remarkable collection of letters I have studied at the Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston.

Messages from Ordinary Americans

On the first day mail was delivered to the White House after the assassination, 45,000 letters of condolence to Jacqueline Kennedy arrived – in eight weeks the number had grown to 800,000 and to 1.5 million a year and a half later. As late as 1965, 1,500 to 2,000 letters a week still arrived for Jacqueline Kennedy. A cross-section of 15,000 American letters has been preserved.

In a nation of some 190 million, those who took the time to write were in some sense exceptional. But the sheer volume of the correspondence, the rapidity with which it accumulated, and the diversity of the letter writers mark these letters as a central part of the public's response to John F. Kennedy's violent death. Letters came from every state in the union, from big cities and small towns, from highly educated Americans and from the barely literate, from people of every racial and ethnic origin and religious and political persuasion, and from the wealthy to those who lived in abject poverty. The age of writers ranged from five years to centenarians, including one writer who had lived through the three previous presidential assassinations.

A Personally Wrenching Loss

The letters reveal that many Americans experienced the death of John F. Kennedy as a deeply personal loss. It was commonplace for citizens to write that they felt as if a member of their own family had died.

Such deeply felt grief reflected, in part, John F. Kennedy's unique status as the nation's first "television president," who lived in the White House during a brief interval when the president enjoyed many of the benefits and few of the downsides of electronic media coverage. In these early days of television – prior to the 24-hour cable news cycle with its blend of reportage, fierce partisanship and critical commentary – prevailing journalistic mores put Kennedy's medical history and personal transgressions out of bounds. Yet his appealing manner and vivacious family were on full display. Just as World War II generation parents were raising Baby Boomers, the Kennedys had the youngest children in the White House of any presidential family in the twentieth century. President Kennedy's frequent press conferences – more than 60 held over the thousand days of his presidency – captivated the public. Three of every four Americans watched these televised events, which were approved by 90% of those who viewed them. No doubt the press conferences contributed to Kennedy's approval rating averaging above 70%, higher than any other president in the polling era. After Kennedy's death, many letter writers praised the press conferences as occasions that had educated, enlightened, and entertained them.

Authors of the condolence letters often invoked the vivid images of President Kennedy and his young family that had reached so many Americans in their living rooms. Some of the most moving letters were written by Americans of modest backgrounds who strongly identified with Kennedy out of a sense of shared experiences as World War II veterans, as parents, or as young people striving to move past an older generation.

A Death Linked to Violent Extremism – And the Civil Rights Struggle

The letters Americans sent to Jacqueline Kennedy commonly linked Kennedy's assassination to a climate of violence, hate, and extremism they believed existed in the United States in 1963. Tellingly, both supporters and opponents of Kennedy’s political efforts and programs expressed utter abhorrence at the violence they believed played a part in the death of the president. Some roundly condemned the easy availability of guns that, as one writer put it, allowed a "madman with a mail order rifle" to deprive the nation of its elected leader.

A substantial number of letters associated the violence of the assassination with the upheaval around civil rights in the final months of Kennedy's presidency. An outraged college student detailed a litany of injustices including "state governors [who] refuse to comply with federal law," "court ordered school integrations" that were "met with hysteria by white parents," the beating of civil rights demonstrators by law enforcement officials and "national leaders" who were "spat upon" – all actions by purportedly "rational" individuals. "Yet we have the hypocrisy to profess amazement and horror," she observed, "that some of our less rational citizens, incited to violence by the attitudes of the rational, are capable of shooting a Negro leader, then bombing a Negro church, and now assassinating the president."

National turmoil over civil rights activism and resistance to desegregation were invoked by many writers as instrumental in Kennedy’s death, despite the lack of evidence tying the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, to civil rights conflicts. In a notable difference from later responses to Kennedy's death, very few letter writers advanced conspiracy theories or even showed much interest in the assassin. But many blamed the divisive climate in the nation for the tragic presidential death. Even segregationists who utterly rejected Kennedy's initiation of civil rights legislation in the summer of 1963 nonetheless both condemned the violence of the period and linked it in their letters to the President's death.

Historians would later criticize the Kennedy presidency for inadequate and halting efforts on behalf of racial equality. Yet in the fall of 1963, many Americans, black and white, pro and con, strongly associated John F. Kennedy with the civil rights cause. The letters they wrote after his death suggest that large numbers of Americans were ready for the efforts that the new president, Lyndon Johnson, would soon make to mobilize national anguish to help push through landmark civil rights laws in 1964 and 1965.

Read more in Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Letters to Jackie: Condolences from a Grieving Nation* (Ecco, 2010).