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You can debate John F. Kennedy's place in the pantheon of U.S. presidents.

Surveys of historians consistently place him among the top dozen chief executives, though he has also appeared high on historians' lists of the most overrated.

But by one measure, JFK unquestionably rates on the Mount Rushmore of presidents: the level of public fascination he engenders, even a half-century after his death.

Consider all the Kennedy narratives that still captivate the American public and evoke emotions today: the magnetic personality. The inspiring idealism. Camelot. Staring down the Soviets. Shooting for the moon. The stolen promise. The questionable morals. The conspiracy theories.

Almost all those themes start or end with the gunshots that rang out in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

The shocking assassination of the young and charismatic leader, unfolding at the dawn of the television age, became one of those rare "where were you when" moments — one that will be long seared in the nation's memory.

"He has such staying power in the public consciousness," said Barbara Perry, a University of Virginia expert on the presidency. "To die the way he did, in such a horrific fashion, playing out in the modern media. In our memory, he is frozen in time, at the peak of his power."

The approach of the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's slaying has unleashed a wealth of remembrances and efforts to reassess his imprint on history. But the interest is hardly new. Tim Borstelmann, a history professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, noted that some 40,000 books have been written about the nation's 35th president.

"There is a perpetual fascination with Kennedy," Borstelmann said.

Sizing up Kennedy's legacy is made far more difficult by the fact his term and life were left unfinished, his presidency lasting but 1,000 days. Some give him credit for elements of his agenda that became law after his death, particularly in civil rights. Others say Congress largely passed them in sympathy for the martyred president.

Regardless, there is no question that in his abbreviated time on the national stage, Kennedy changed the presidency, the nation and the world.

Thomas Gouttierre, director of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Afghanistan Studies, remembers watching the dynamic presidential candidate speak at his college in Ohio in 1960.

"Here was a man proposing the United States reach out to the rest of the world not with military over-

All assessments of the JFK legacy, as well as the "what might have been" conjecturing about where his presidency could have gone, are now tinted by the rose-colored view of his unfinished term as the embodiment of an American Camelot.

tones, but with cooperative, peaceful objectives," Gouttierre said. "I truly was inspired by it."

Four years later, Gouttierre and his wife became among the first volunteers in Kennedy's Peace Corps. Their life-changing assignment: Afghanistan.

Upon Gouttierre's arrival in the isolated, impoverished country in 1964, Afghans who spoke no English would utter Kennedy's name and then shake their heads, sharing America's dismay over his death.

Some observers still ponder what could have been, whether the agony of the 1960s — dominated by an unpopular war, civil rights strife, generational clashes, a loss of trust in government and more assassinations — could have been avoided had Kennedy lived.

Almost surely, much of that tumult was inevitable. But there is little doubt his slaying forever altered the course of American history.

"When you talk to people from that time about the Kennedy presidency, there was so much hope about what could be accomplished," said Barb Pickering, a UNO communications professor. "Even now, when people talk of JFK, you hear a lot of what-ifs."

To truly appreciate Kennedy's impact on the presidency, one must first understand just how different he was from the grandfatherly men who had occupied the White House over the three decades before.

Kennedy — at 43, the youngest man elected to the office — exuded charm, wit and flair that intoxicated audiences. After Kennedy, presidential candidates would have to be perceived as possessing style as well as substance if they were to have any hope of being elected.

Then throw in JFK's gorgeous wife, Jacqueline. She made fashion, well, fashionable, not afraid to wear a swimsuit in public or to put her own style touch on the stodgy White House. And she did it all while doing her part to birth and raise the children of the baby boom.

The attractive young couple seemed made for the new media age being ushered in to the nation's living rooms. In 1950, 9 percent of homes in America had TVs. By the election year of 1960, nearly 90 percent did.

Kennedy quickly mastered the medium, even his routine press conferences becoming must-see TV. Images of the Kennedy children romping in the White House became staples of popular culture. Women of the Greatest Generation tried to emulate Jackie's hairdos. The family truly seemed like American royalty.

And to a nation that was booming economically, driving sleek, new air-conditioned cars and moving into homes in the boundless suburbs, the possibilities JFK presented seemed equally endless.

"He came along right as the United States was assuming its position of dominance in the world, and he

**INDULGENT DADDY:** President John F. Kennedy takes a break from his work in the Oval Office to watch his children, Caroline and John Jr., dancing about while he claps in time. Americans adored the Kennedy children and grieved at their loss on Nov. 22, 1963.

exuded a sort of confidence and visionary quality for the future," said John Cavanaugh, a Democrat who as a boy met Kennedy in Omaha, and later served Nebraska in Congress. "We've never recaptured that sense of confidence and optimism."

Perhaps no one took more hope and inspiration from Kennedy's election than the millions of Roman Catholics such as Cavanaugh. At the time it was widely believed that if Kennedy became the nation's first Catholic president, the pope would be calling the shots in Washington.

"It sounds silly now, but in tremendously Protestant rural Iowa, where I grew up, that was real," said UNL political scientist John Hibbing.

Kennedy's election took down a barrier and opened other future possibilities, such as the nation's first black president.

In office, Kennedy committed an early blunder with the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, a disastrous, CIA-planned operation. Over time, though, national security would arguably emerge as a Kennedy strength.

In the superpower showdown of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK successfully negotiated the removal of Soviet nuclear warheads from Cuba, taking the world away from the brink of annihilation. He later inked the world's first nuclear test ban treaty.

By creating the Peace Corps, he sowed U.S. goodwill in underdeveloped nations around the globe.

In his drive to best the front-running Soviets in space, Kennedy set a national goal of putting a man on the moon. It was an incredibly audacious dream, but one that ultimately unleashed an explosion of advancements in science and technology that still affect everyday life.

JFK's Vietnam War legacy is tougher to assess. By the time he was killed he had put 16,000 U.S. advisers on the ground in Southeast Asia, and some were dying. But he had also expressed reluctance to getting directly involved in a ground war there.

Marc Selverstone, a University of Virginia scholar who has listened to secret White House tapes on Vietnam, said while Kennedy was committed to winning the war, it seems unlikely he would have gone all-in as Lyndon Johnson did, to the tune of 500,000 American ground troops.

Yet it's impossible to know exactly how JFK would have responded to subsequent events, particularly when it became clear South Vietnam was losing the war.

"Kennedy didn't have to confront Vietnam in the same way LBJ did,"

Selverstone said. "His legacy benefited from that timing."

Domestically, Kennedy took advantage of the economic boom and passed an income tax cut that Republican administrations after him would hold up as a model.

Though Kennedy was sympathetic toward the plight of blacks in the South, he initially treaded carefully regarding civil rights, trying to hold together the Democratic South that had helped him get elected.

But when police dogs and fire hoses were turned against peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham, Ala., in May 1963, Kennedy had seen enough. He became the first president to declare that civil rights and integration were moral issues the nation should fight for. Upon his death, with master legislator Johnson invoking the president's memory, Congress passed JFK-introduced legislation that became the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Kennedy was just beginning his 1964 re-election bid when he was cut down. That's when the Kennedy-administration-as-Camelot mythology was born. Jackie summoned a reporter and repeated the final refrain from one of JFK's favorite musicals:

*Don't let it be forgot  
That once there was a spot  
For one brief shining moment  
that was known  
As Camelot.*

If Kennedy had remained in office, no one knows how much his light would have dimmed, as it inevitably does as presidents face the challenge of governing a diverse and divided nation. And as he helped break down the historic barriers between elected officials' public and private lives, it's also hard to guess what would have happened if his serial womanizing had become common knowledge.

"We see today that private lives are no longer private," said Rick Witmer, a Creighton University political scientist. "He may have been the embodiment of that transition."

But even the revelation of Kennedy's affairs has done little to tarnish his legacy. To know the truth of that, you only have to look at opinion polls.

When Gallup in 2010 polled the popularity of presidents over the past half century, Kennedy came in at No. 1, with 85 percent approval; Ronald Reagan was second, at 74 percent.

When polled against presidents across the ages, JFK falls not far below the Rushmorian giants Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln.

In many ways, JFK today remains to America the president of Nov. 22, 1963, just before the first fateful shot.

The smiling president is seated in the limo next to Jackie and waving to adoring onlookers. Indeed, a man frozen in time.

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