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Biographical Note

Dantas, Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs (1961-1962), wrote this article for a journal in Brazil a week after President John F. Kennedy's (JFK) death. His article reflects on JFK's presidency and legacy, among other issues.

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“Tragedy and Enigma in Kennedy’s Death ”

by
San Tiago Dantas

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Two aspects of President Kennedy’s [John F. Kennedy] death are particularly worthy of thought: the tragedy and the enigma. Tragedy lies in this man’s brutal wrenching from life at the precise moment when the meaning of his historic contribution seemed to shine in everyone’s eyes. The enigma lies in the somber atmosphere which envelops the cause of the assassination in a chain of equivocal surmise and makes it at least temporarily inexplicable.

Not all the actions and episodes that made up President Kennedy’s Administration merit our unreserved adherence or even our sympathetic approval. It is not fitting, however, to separate the ones from the others in order to issue isolated judgments on each. Every political action is a process that develops in successive phases,

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made up of sometimes contradictory episodes, whose unity does not become clear until its conclusion or after certain strokes that are capable of wholly clearing up its objectives. Any man in public life who is unwilling to run such a risk in exchange for final success—the risk of going through apparently contradictory stages—cannot accomplish much and is no statesman, but at best a salesman of ideas, a demagogue, or an ideologist. What makes a statesman is the full acceptance of the risk of temporary failures in the serene certainty of the ultimate meaning [success] of his move. The risk lies in that the job may be interrupted before it is unified and clarified; or in that popular judgment may eventually be passed at a moment when the current account shows unfavorable balances.

The primary duty of a man in public life—or at least of one who is truly worthy of being thus called—consists in assuming the risk unhesitatingly, for it does not fall primarily upon the nation or the community, but upon the individual who is responsible for serving that nation or that community.

The greater the contradictions that split a community, the more insuperable will become the mutual resistances that are inherent in those very contradictions, the more numerous and the

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riskier will be the concessions and the withdrawals on the part of the statesman who is prepared to take history in hand and lead it toward an objective. One who is content with being the spokesman for a political ideology, the demagogue who does not make himself acceptable to the public except insofar as he is malleable to the people's trends and injunctions [impositions]—such men are incapable of dialectic action, and for that reason they are worth more as the symptoms than as the causes of social change.

It was natural that, being a true statesman, President Kennedy should have drawn up an itinerary for government, which appears as a curve expressing the innumerable contradictions and resistances he would have to face. His political line itself did not reflect national unanimity, but, rather, an advanced position which he—with a statesman's strategy— attempted to make viable. Were we to isolate his actions, to split them up and take them out of the unified context of his intentions, we would necessarily have before us many isolated moments of unequal judgment. His actions as a statesman should not, however, be understood in that manner. If viewed separately, each moment reflects every possible adjustment to certain obstacles and contradictions. But before his job was interrupted he

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had the good fortune of being able to show full evidence of the greatness of his objectives and thus to generate a historic force whose influence, even now, may have become irreversible.

The fundamental point of such evidence, or enlightenment, was the demonstration that his foreign policy was of a pacifist nature, plus the full acceptance of coexistence with opposing regimes and ideologies as a contingency of the times and a test from which democracy cannot escape.

Everyone knows that in the United States, as in other countries—including those which, like our own, have no chance in sight (and should not seek it) of participating in the production and the use of nuclear weapons with an indeterminate destructive power—a pro-war trend exists, abides, and perseveres, and in it are united the most backward minds, perhaps with no awareness that they are allies in the cause of destruction of mankind and civilization. Facing this trend and counteracting it with a position that aimed at competitive coexistence—in which representative democracy would have to seek its victory not by its superior means of extermination, but by its greater ability to provide a valid answer to the problems of contemporary man—that was perhaps the President's greatest achievement, one which made him a target of hatred from reactionaries but also one

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which allowed him to give a new dimension to his nation's leadership.

Another point that is closely related to us was his contribution toward giving the struggle against economic under development a sense of social change, so that it could be understood not as assistance of a humanitarian nature to impoverished peoples, but, rather, as a condition for a free world's organization and survival.

It is true that on this point he was unable to reach such clear cut results, or arrive at such constructive formulas, as in his attempts toward peace preservation. Resistances created by parochial minds made it impossible, and still do, for industrial countries to open their eyes fully to the problem. Somewhere between the advanced, sometimes bold, formulas, and the ways of carrying them out, the concept often became petty, and no adequate answers were provided for certain challenges which might change the destinies of the contemporary world and give new foundations to the policy aimed at preserving liberal institutions. But that did not keep Kennedy from embodying in his country—by means of struggles carried out with patience—the desire to provide a rationale for the policy of economic cooperation and imbue it with a universal sense.

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Finally, it was President Kennedy who picked up the glove to face the racial-segregation problem. That is the point at which the United States dramatically loses its right to speak on behalf of a free civilization—that is, it loses authenticity in a leadership which then runs the risk of being based almost exclusively on material superiority.

Kennedy was unable to carry through the task of abolition as he had the means and the willingness to do, but when death came to put an end to his fight, his position had been clearly defined in terms of practical action. It was from him, and from other men in his Administration, that—after a confrontation with Congress—the impulse would come toward definitive integration, as is demanded nowadays by everything that is alive and dynamic in the people's consciousness.

What can death do against the strength of such attitudes? What can it do against the opening up of roads which the meanness of death's allies can still think of blocking?

That is where, the tragedy becomes complete and makes inviolable that spiritual force already freed and on its way toward consolidation.

It is possible, it is inevitable even, that the forces of the

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past, the resistances, against which Kennedy's leadership was forced to collide and to measure itself during his Administration years, may come back in various shapes in an attempt to conquer lost positions again.

A new spirit, depersonalized and, so to speak, "immaterialized" by the very tragedy of the leader's passing away, may have extended its influence and penetrated into the people's consciousness not as a mere form of idealism, but, rather, as a new standard of judgment and behavior.

In a way, the United States after Kennedy will be like the United States after Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln]—or, in a time nearer to us, like the United States after Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt]

[END OF ARTICLE]

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**San Tiago Dantas article
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