



U.S. president John F. Kennedy, pictured in 1962, throwing the season's first pitch at the baseball stadium in Washington, D.C. Kennedy was shot on Nov. 22, 1963. On the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination, Kennedy's greatest lesson—that humanity can build a world of peace—is lost amid the flotsam of today's political wreckage. Photograph courtesy of the U.S. National Archives via Picryl.com

# As John F. Kennedy famously said in his inaugural speech, we should never negotiate out of fear, and never fear to negotiate

Jeffrey Sachs, the renowned senior UN adviser and author, said the key lesson that we can learn from Kennedy 'is to fashion the future out of our rational hopes, not our fears.'

Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—I was having lunch with my colleagues in a restaurant in Union City, New Jersey, when the room suddenly went still. A waiter turned up the radio: "President Kennedy has been shot." In half an hour, the U.S. president was pronounced

dead of gunshots in Dallas, Texas. The date was Nov. 22, 1963. The world changed at that moment from the hope for peace to the gloom of a renewed Cold War. I was 34 years old, and my life changed in that instant, too.

Now, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of the 35th president of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy's greatest lesson—that humanity can build a world of peace—is lost amid the flotsam of today's political wreckage. During his 1,036-day presidency, Kennedy taught that peace can be attained not by a sudden revolution of human nature, but by a gradual evolution in human institutions.

In a flash, the light went out of America. The Vietnam war, which Kennedy had been trying to wind down, flared up again. The war machine that his predecessor Dwight D. Eisenhower had warned against reasserted itself. Conspiracy theories on who really killed J.F.K. abounded.

Shortly afterwards, I returned to my native Canada after eight years living as a young journalist in a dynamic, energetic society where the possibilities seemed

endless. I can now see that my years in the U.S., travelling through most of the states and writing articles about people's hopes for their own lives, prepared me for a political life of my own. But it was Kennedy, flawed as he was, whose inspiration filled me with a belief that humanity is not doomed, that we can indeed create our own future.

It is excruciatingly sad for me to see how the United States has itself lost this core belief, and how Canada, which was energized at the time by Kennedy's optimism, has sunk into quagmires of doubts about our own competence.

Kennedy's greatest speech as president was undoubtedly his address on peace June 10, 1963, to American University, which Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev hailed as "the greatest speech by any American president since Roosevelt."

Kennedy began by explaining the kind of peace he sought: "Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the

kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living..." He asked Americans to examine their attitudes towards the Soviet Union and its people, not to see only a distorted and desperate view, but discover common interests. Then came words that resounded through the world.

"If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal."

He announced negotiations would begin on a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, and declared the U.S. would no longer conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev responded positively with effusive praise, but would not accept a comprehensive ban; he did support a limited treaty. Less than two months later, the Partial Test Ban Treaty, having been ratified by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, entered into force.

Unfortunately, the limited treaty did not stop all nuclear testing; it permitted underground testing to continue. But it did stop atmospheric testing, and that resulted in reducing deadly radioactive fallout. A comprehensive treaty, banning all nuclear testing, would have to wait until 1996. Though U.S. president Bill Clinton was the first to sign it, the mood in the American Senate had by that time soured, and ratification was denied. Lacking the ratification of both the U.S. and China, the comprehensive treaty has not yet entered into force.

Yet Kennedy, a realist for peace, showed that a co-operative peace could be built. He called the limited treaty his proudest achievement—and there would be more.

What might the world have gained if Kennedy had lived and obtained a second term? That is the agonizing question that lingers to this day. How different would the world be today? Could Kennedy have stopped the downward spiral to war? Jeffrey Sachs, the renowned senior UN adviser and author of *JFK's Quest for Peace: To Move the World*, says the most important lesson that we can learn from Kennedy "is to fashion the future out of our rational hopes, not our fears."

I, for one, sincerely believe we should live in a world where, as J.F.K. said in his inaugural speech, we would not negotiate out of fear, but we would never fear to negotiate. That applies to Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas today.

Former Senator Douglas Roche's newest book is *Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War Free World* (amazon.ca).

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