

Mitchell's Musings 12-4-13: Leadership and Accomplishment: There Must Be Both

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There was much ado about President John Kennedy on the 50th anniversary of his assassination a couple of weeks ago. It is interesting that the key date involved in the celebrations was the assassination anniversary rather than either his birthday or the date of his election.¹ Note that Lincoln's Birthday is what appears on calendars – or did until we combined it with Washington's Birthday and placed it into an all-purpose Presidents' Day. Lincoln was assassinated, too, but no one celebrates that date. The explanation in the Kennedy case can't be the most people still remember the assassination since the median age of the U.S. population is currently about 37. Despite the repeated phrase that everyone remembers where they were when they heard of the assassination, most people weren't anywhere.

The oddity of the assassination-celebration is not the only peculiarity I observed. Among the various op eds that appeared was one by Richard Reeves which was published in the *Los Angeles Times* and probably other newspapers.² Reeves notes that many people - when asked - rank Kennedy up with major presidents such as Lincoln, despite Kennedy's lesser importance. But the thrust of Reeves' article was that Kennedy, despite the short duration of his presidency, was a near-great. Nonetheless, the key point of the op ed seemed to be in the three sentences below:

...But image counts, and so do words. Kennedy, like Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, understood that words and images are the way to reach millions of people. The president's job is to lead the nation, not manage the government, which is unmanageable. Nobody remembers whether Lincoln balanced the budget...

Let's note that while nobody remembers whether Lincoln balanced the budget, everybody remembers that he won the Civil War. Lincoln didn't only lead in the sense of having an agenda; he accomplished his key goals of maintaining the union between north and south and of abolishing slavery. The idea of leadership independent of accomplishment is simply ludicrous. And, by the way, what does it mean to say that the government is unmanageable? Lincoln apparently managed it well enough to win the War. Difficult to manage is not the same as unmanageable. The op ed confuses leadership in Reeves' sense as a necessary quality with leadership as necessary *and sufficient*.

I found a far more balanced view of Kennedy and of his times recently – a view which interestingly enough appeared only a few days after the assassination when there was far less time to reflect on the Kennedy presidency. There was no benefit of hindsight. New York radio commentator and humorist Jean Shepherd deviated from his standard program format on November 25, 1963, and noted that

¹ The election date is particularly of interest since it wasn't clear until well into the next day that Kennedy actually had been elected: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il8T0y96LXU>.

² www.latimes.com/opinion/commentary/la-oe-reeves-kennedy-legacy-20131121,0,5185516.story.

people often impute more control of events to the president and other political leaders than they actually have.³ So it is difficult for top officials to accomplish their goals, but not impossible.

The Reeves confusion between necessary and necessary-and-sufficient is unfortunate, whether we are talking about leadership in government – federal, state, or local – or leadership in private organizations. Clearly, micro-management from the top doesn't work in large and complex organizations. But there needs to be some mechanism put in place for the leader to monitor whether things are getting done or not. There needs to be some recognition going into the top job that ordering that something be done is not the same as getting it done. There needs to be monitoring and auditing and incentives for outcomes. There needs to be a recognition going in that underlings are not going to want to be bearers of bad tidings. Absent those basic elements of sound management, leaders who just inspire or who only shape opinion - but don't achieve - are lacking something fundamental.

I suspect the confused vision of leadership expressed in the Reeves piece is more widespread than just with regard to Kennedy, or to presidents generally, or to top leadership in the public sector at any level. There is a mistaken view that the scut work of administering and producing is unimportant and that "anyone" can do it. Maybe some of it can be done by "anyone," but only if the incentives, monitoring, and control systems are in place and are operating. A great leader must find a way to make it happen. In the Kennedy case, for example, we know for sure it didn't happen in the case of the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Of course, the Bay of Pigs was a form of on-the-job training for Kennedy. The Shepherd broadcast, made right after the assassination, suggests that Kennedy had learned about the strong limitations of the idea that what the president wants is what the president gets and that Kennedy had become a "realist." If so, Kennedy would likely have agreed with the view that what would have happened after November 1963 to Civil Rights legislation and other concerns of the era had he lived simply cannot be known.

³ I have posted the program in three parts at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUZVRu6fIOM>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94Z-utTByHA>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1otmAjAUlo>.