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BC-USA-JFK (GENERAL FEATURE)

JFK LEGACY STRONGER THAN EVER ON 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS BIRTH
BY JOHN ABELL

BOSTON, MAY 26, REUTER - JOHN F. KENNEDY, WHOSE STORYBOOK
CAMELOT: PRESIDENCY ENDED IN NOVEMBER 1963 WITH SHOTS HEARD
ROUND THE WORLD, REMAINS FROZEN IN TIME IN THE MINDS OF
AMERICANS AS A CHARISMATIC 46-YEAR-OLD.

WOULD KENNEDY, WHO WOULD HAVE TURNED 75 ON FRIDAY, HAVE BEEN
VIEWED AS A RESPECTED ELDER STATESMAN HAD HE LIVED -- OR AS A
WELL-MEANING PLAYBOY WHO NUDGED THE UNITED STATES INTO THE
NATION'S MOST UNPOPULAR AND POINTLESS WAR IN VIETNAM?

THE ANSWER WILL NEVER BE KNOWN, BUT IN DEATH THE KENNEDY
LEGACY STILL CAPTIVATES AMERICANS -- PERHAPS BECAUSE HE DIED
YOUNG, OR BECAUSE HIS FIRE BURNED SO BRIGHT, OR BECAUSE IT IS
CONSIDERED POLITE TO DWELL ON THE SINS ONLY OF LIVING HEROES.

ALTHOUGH THE WORLD MAY HAVE BECOME INURED TO POLITICAL
ASSASSINATIONS SINCE 1963 -- KENNEDY'S WAS FOLLOWED BY THOSE OF
HIS BROTHER ROBERT, CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER MARTIN LUTHER KING, TWO
INDIAN PRIME MINISTERS NAMED GANDHI AND MANY OTHERS -- HE WAS
ONLY THE FOURTH U.S. PRESIDENT KILLED IN OFFICE AND THE FIRST IN
MORE THAN 60 YEARS.

THE ELDEST SURVIVING CHILD OF WHAT HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS
AMERICA'S ROYAL FAMILY, WHOSE SELF-MADE MILLIONAIRE PATRIARCH
WAS DETERMINED TO PUT A SON IN THE WHITE HOUSE, KENNEDY WAS
STEEPED FROM AN EARLY AGE IN THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SERVICE.

ALWAYS AT EASE IN THE PUBLIC EYE, KENNEDY LEAVENED HIS
ENGAGING ORATORY WITH AN EASY WIT THAT DISARMED OPPONENTS AND
SEEMED TO PUT HIM WITHIN REACH OF THE COMMON PERSON.

HE JOKED ON AN OVERSEAS TRIP THAT HE WAS THE GUY WITH
JACQUELINE, HIS STUNNING AND POPULAR WIFE, AND AS A YALE
COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER HE BOASTED THAT HE NOW ENJOYED
THE BEST

OF BOTH WORLDS -- A HARVARD EDUCATION AND A YALE DEGREE.::

KENNEDY'S MURDER IN DALLAS ON NOVEMBER 22, 1963 DREW
AMERICANS TOGETHER AS NEVER BEFORE IN PEACETIME. THE COUNTRY
SEEMED TO LOSE ITS INNOCENCE OVERNIGHT AS IT CONFRONTED THE
HORRIFYING REALITIES THAT MUCH OF THE WORLD ROUTINELY ENDURED.

THE KILLING ALSO BEGAN WHAT WOULD BE A BLOODY AND DIVISIVE
PERIOD THAT SAW THE MURDERS OF ROBERT KENNEDY AND KING, VIOLENT
PROTESTS AGAINST THE ESCALATING WAR IN VIETNAM AND THE
RESIGNATION IN DISGRACE OF PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON AFTER THE
WATERGATE SCANDAL.

NOW AMERICANS HAVE LARGELY COME TO TERMS WITH VIETNAM,
RECALL THE OTHER ASSASSINATIONS ONLY OCCASIONALLY AND HAVE SEEN
NIXON RESURRECTED AS A RESPECTED ELDER STATESMAN.

BUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF KENNEDY'S MURDER REMAIN AN
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UNSETTLING AND SEEMINGLY UNSETTLABLE OBSESSION.

THE CONTROVERSY WAS REFUELLED LAST YEAR WHEN OLIVER STONE'S FILM

JFK:: ASSERTED WHAT MANY AMERICANS MAY BELIEVE BUT CANNOT PROVE -- THAT KENNEDY WAS KILLED IN A FRIGHTENING CONSPIRACY REACHING TO THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THE GOVERNMENT.

JFK:: DREW UNPRECEDENTED CRITICISM EVEN BEFORE ITS RELEASE -- NOT IN MOVIE REVIEWS BUT ON OP-ED PAGES WHERE KENNEDY COLLEAGUES AND CONTEMPORARIES CONDEMNED IT AS A SKILFUL FICTION STRUNG TOGETHER WITH TRUTHS, HALF-TRUTHS AND UNTRUTHS.

BUT IT INTENSIFIED INTEREST IN HOW AND WHY KENNEDY WAS KILLED AS A GENERATION BORN LONG AFTER HIS DEATH SOUGHT NEW ANSWERS TO THE OLD QUESTIONS.

JFK'S ONLY SURVIVING BROTHER, SENATOR TED KENNEDY, SAID FOR THE FIRST TIME DURING THE FILM'S RELEASE THAT VOLUMINOUS U.S. FILES ON THE MURDER INVESTIGATION, MEANT TO BE SEALED UNTIL WELL INTO THE NEXT CENTURY, SHOULD BE MADE PUBLIC.

BUT HE ALSO SAID HE BELIEVED FULL DISCLOSURE WOULD DO NOTHING TO CONTRADICT THE OFFICIAL WARREN COMMISSION CONCLUSION THAT A SINGLE ASSASSIN, MOST LIKELY LEE HARVEY OSWALD, KILLED THE PRESIDENT.

AS CALLS FOR RELEASE OF THE FILES GROW, THOSE WHO HAVE MADE A LIFE'S WORK OF PERPETUATING CONSPIRACY THEORIES MAY SOON HAVE A CHANCE TO COMB THEM FOR A SMOKING GUN.

KENNEDY, THE NATION'S FIRST AND ONLY ROMAN CATHOLIC PRESIDENT, WAS ELECTED BY ONE OF THE SLINNEST MARGINS IN U.S. HISTORY, DEFEATING THEN VICE-PRESIDENT NIXON.

ALTHOUGH KENNEDY'S POPULARITY RATINGS SUFFERED DURING HIS THREE-YEAR TENURE, HE BREATHED NEW LIFE INTO THE OFFICE AS THE FIRST PRESIDENT BORN IN THIS CENTURY AND A MAN OF GREAT PERSONAL CHARM WITH AN ATTRACTIVE WIFE AND YOUNG FAMILY.

HE DREAMED OF SENDING MEN TO THE MOON AND BRINGING THEM HOME SAFELY BY THE END OF THE DECADE BUT DID NOT LIVE TO SEE HIS VISION REALISED, ON SCHEDULE, IN 1969.

HE CHALLENGED PEOPLE TO ASK NOT WHAT THEIR COUNTRY COULD DO FOR THEM BUT WHAT THEY COULD DO FOR THEIR COUNTRY, A GENERATION BEFORE GEORGE BUSH CALLED FOR A THOUSAND POINTS OF LIGHT.

HE BOTCHED AN ILL-ADVISED ATTEMPT TO TOPPLE CUBA'S FIDEL CASTRO BUT STARED DOWN SOVIET LEADER NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV IN THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS AND INSPIRED THE WEST TO STAND AGAINST COMMUNISM BY DECLARING, IN THE SHADOW OF THE IRON CURTAIN NEAR THE NEWLY BUILT BERLIN WALL, ICH BIN EIN BERLINER.::

FOR THE KENNEDYS, THE MURDER IS NOT A HISTORICAL EVENT BUT THE TRAGIC LOSS OF A HUSBAND, FATHER, BROTHER AND UNCLE. THEY MARK THE ANNIVERSARY OF HIS BIRTH, NEVER HIS DEATH.

EACH YEAR IN MAY KENNEDY FAMILY MEMBERS AWARD A JOHN F.

KENNEDY PROFILE IN COURAGE:: PRIZE -- NAMED FOR HIS PULITZER-PRIZE WINNING BOOK -- TO A PUBLIC FIGURE WHO HAS DEMONSTRATED

AN EXEMPLARY ACT OF POLITICAL COURAGE.::

THEY ALSO REMEMBER HIM AT A FORUM AT THE JOHN F. KENNEDY

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SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT AT HARVARD, WHERE OLD FRIENDS REMINISCE.

THIS YEAR RICHARD GOODWIN, A FORMER KENNEDY SPEECHWRITER, AND OTHERS WILL DISCUSS KENNEDY'S COMMITMENT TO THE ARTS IN A PUBLIC SEMINAR MODERATED BY HIS SON, JOHN JUNIOR, WHO WAS JUST SHY OF HIS THIRD BIRTHDAY WHEN HIS FATHER WAS KILLED.

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