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PBS documentary brings to life JFK's flaws, courage

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Nov. 9, 2013

"JFK: Like No Other," PBS American Experience
9 p.m. Eastern time Nov. 11 (part one) and Nov. 12 (part two) (Check local listings)

Millions of us remember where we were at the exact moment we heard the news that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963. It was about 11:30 a.m. in San Diego that Friday, and I was going to my locker to get my lunch. One of my seventh-grade classmates -- I think his name was Johnny -- came running by the bank of lockers, screaming over and over, "Someone shot the president!"

I remember saying, "Don't joke like that!"

He stopped and held out a prohibited transistor radio and looked at me with such innocence and said, "It's true! It's on the radio!" And so it was.

I went by myself to an empty classroom and took out my rosary, which I did not normally have with me. Some other kids came in with their lunches and ate in stunned silence. When we were back in class, the principal announced over the loudspeaker what had happened, called for a moment of silence, then said we would stay in school. He was sure President Kennedy would want that.

It was the "birthday" of our Girl Scout troop that day, too. But instead of the celebration, we gathered in the parking lot of the Methodist church where we met each week, formed a big circle, prayed silently for a while, and then went home.

It was so sad, shocking and senseless.

We will all recount our stories on Nov. 22 this year, and perhaps speak of where we were the next morning, when Jack Ruby shot and killed the suspect, Lee Harvey Oswald. I had just got home from CCD and was folding laundry in front of the TV. I wasn't watching at that moment, but my dad walked through the room as the shot rang out, and I can never forget his exclamation.

But the PBS documentary series American Experience airing Nov. 11-12, "JFK: Like No Other," produced and directed by Susan Bellows, is not going to analyze the events of Nov. 22 and what followed. It's a comprehensive, unembellished and highly watchable four-hour documentary film on the life, political career and presidency of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, ending with one of the saddest days many of us will remember.

A few things stood out for me in the film about "the most fearless, most tragic presidency in our history," as one commentator put it, especially his foreign policy and how much of it still influences presidents, Republican and Democrat, one being to fight small wars rather than big ones. We see the pattern failing over and over. The threat then was the Soviet Union, the spread of communism, and the danger of nuclear war. What led up to the disaster at the Bay of Pigs was one of JFK's biggest failures, and the lies almost undid his presidency before it

started.

JFK's concern about the communist threat and the Cold War and his decision to fight and send arms for small wars is what got us into Vietnam, arguably one of the biggest disasters in our history. The film also goes behind the scenes of how JFK finessed a wise solution to the Cuban missile crisis with President Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union, letting us recall more fearful days than many of us will want to.

President Kennedy ignored anyone who didn't want him speaking off the cuff. He did it anyway. He also did not lead by consensus; instead, he brought in experts or assigned people to research options, then heard their ideas and made his decision. He learned it was not the most effective leadership model. He believed that in a country the size of ours, it was words -- that is, rhetoric -- not actions that counted. But public speaking and electioneering did not come naturally to him; he had to learn it, and he did. Add in lots of his father's money, his good looks and knowing how to interact with the camera, and he won the presidency over the stiff Richard Nixon by the slimmest of margins.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. But John Kennedy and his brother Bobby, the attorney general, were not interested in domestic issues except for education, affordable health care for the elderly, and the economic trade deficit. And he did want the U.S. to beat Russia to the moon and back.

When King was arrested and put in state prison in Georgia, against all advice, including Bobby's (his campaign manager), JFK called Coretta Scott King to express his concern and say he was thinking of her. But it seems he never heard of the Freedom Riders until they were accosted and it was in the newspapers. But it was Birmingham, Ala., Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor's unleashing of dogs and fire hoses and his allowing white supremacist violence to go unchecked that finally got JFK to notice. He didn't want to ask Congress for civil rights legislation, but he was forced to.

As a congressman, JFK was a playboy. As president, he was propped up by steroids for his Addison's disease (which his election campaign denied he had) and a cocktail of painkillers for his back injury. We all know he was a womanizer, and this film confirms it without naming names. However, it seems that in the last months before his death, he and his wife, Jackie, grew closer. She was lonely and used to take solitary vacations to the Cape, away from the White House and the Kennedy compound, but as the film tells it, she did love him very much.

The archival footage is seamlessly edited together. The commentary by authors Sally Bedell Smith and Robert Caro; JFK's sister Jean Kennedy Smith; John Seigenthaler, who served in the Kennedy administration; and others enrich the film. I hope high school students and others will watch this film not as hagiography, but to understand the flaws that politicians bring with them to office and the flashes of wisdom and brilliance that can make a difference in people's lives if indeed they have the courage.

Now, 50 years later, members of the many branches of the Kennedy family continue in public service. Last year, we saw HBO's brilliant film "Ethel [1]," a documentary about Ethel Kennedy, Bobby's wife who was widowed after his assassination in 1968. John F. Kennedy Jr. is dead by accident; Ted Kennedy was the fourth-longest serving senator in U.S. history; and Caroline Kennedy, JFK's daughter, was just confirmed as ambassador to Japan.

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[1] http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/ethel