Why is the life and death of the 35th US President still so relevant 50 years on? Jeffrey D. Sachs evaluates a visionary hero

John F. Kennedy’s death seared the world like no other in modern history. Countless statesmen, politicians, heroes and celebrities have riveted the world in their lives and deaths, but for my generation, it is JFK’s death that divides the world into before and after. I had just turned nine, and my parents were 35 years old. As with Joshua at Jericho, the Sun and Moon seemed to stand still in Dallas that day a half-century ago. And, even stranger, the feeling of world-changing loss has actually grown rather than diminished with the passage of time.

The public’s enduring regard for JFK has defied the exposés of historians. We have come to understand much better the many policy failures of his presidency; discovered the excesses of his sexual committed by the CIA under his authority. Yet most Americans of
my generation have placed those undoubted flaws and failings in a larger context. JFK represented for us the hopes and potential of our own lives, and of an America that we believed, as JFK famously said, could truly light the world.

The world loved Kennedy in his life and mourned him in his death, for his youthful vigour, charm, optimism, intelligence and manifest goodwill. No revelation has changed the basic facts — he was a hugely talented man who loved life, understood its risks and its possibilities, and yearned to create a better world. He was a talented ward politician who could wheel and deal, and who won every election he entered; but most of all he was a man with a purpose: to help deliver a society befitting of the best of us, not the worst. We believed in him and that mission.

We accepted JFK's definition of this task in the beautiful closing words of his inaugural address: "With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on Earth God's work must truly be our own."

I was, of course, far too young to understand or appreciate these things at the time of Kennedy's death, yet a half-century on I can see clearly his importance, not only in America's modern history but in my own life too. On that Friday 50 years ago, dismissed from grade school abruptly when the shocking news came in, I arrived home by school bus to a darkened house to find my parents, my Rocks of Gibraltar, sobbing in front of the television screen. There we would sit as a family for four days, until the young murdered President was interred in Arlington National Cemetery. My only break from the TV was a short trip to Sunday school, only to be picked up an hour later with the shocking news that JFK's purported assassin had also just been killed. The shock and thunder continued to roll from the skies.

My eyes were now open to history, politics, and change. My first true political love was not John — I was too young — but his brother Robert, who in 1968 touched my 14-year-old soul as no one had ever before (nor since). Here was the man who would restore the legacy and hope of his brother, who would carry on the fight for racial and economic justice and halt the unfolding carnage in Vietnam, which was then a distant thunder that even as a 14-year-old I could sense was leading America to mayhem and disaster. And then Robert was killed like his brother, just after a friend and I had stayed up late to celebrate RFK's great victory in the 1968 California primary election.

Just weeks earlier, Martin Luther King's assassination had already created an ineffable loss, and King's death had caused us to invest even greater hopes in RFK. Now JFK, MLK and RFK were all gone. marches in the streets, and the growing doubts about the Warren Commission report.
And so the death of JFK truly came to mark the end of an era. The torch had been passed to a new generation, but now it lay in blood, with hopes shattered. In many sharp blows, the pummelling continued: the Vietnam War, the Cambodian secret bombings and genocide that followed, the riots at the Chicago Democratic Convention, Watergate, the Iran hostage crisis, Star Wars (Ronald Reagan’s missile plan, not the movies), the revelations of CIA murder plots, the spinning of assassination theories, the Contras, 9/11, WMDs, the hideous Iraq War, drones hitting wedding celebrants, and now Edward Snowden and the NSA. Yes, even 50 years on, we feel an acute loss of hope and of opportunity, a rupture with what might have been.

There have been, of course, many historic triumphs after Kennedy’s death. The colonial era ended. The US won the Cold War. The Soviet Union collapsed. Apartheid ended. Latin America made a successful passage to democracy. Africa, too, seems on the way. And global poverty rates are falling widely, if not universally. These are measures of real progress. Many of them are the remarkable changes that JFK himself had bid us to dream.

Yet we still feel that somehow we have fallen far short of what might have been. More importantly, JFK’s life, death and example still mark for us how we might and should aim higher in our own time. I came to appreciate this restorative aspect of JFK’s legacy in my own work during the past dozen or so years.

During the earliest years of my career, in the 1980s, the memories of the 1960s played little direct role in my own activities and thinking. The losses of JFK, RFK and MLK were still fresh in my mind, but the rubble of Vietnam and Watergate loomed much larger in my thoughts and understanding of the world than the legacy of JFK per se. I vividly remembered that Kennedy had asked us to embrace the public purpose, and had boldly called on us to ask what we could do for our country and for the world. Yet I did not seek any more direct lessons nor guidance from JFK’s words and his leadership as President.

And yet into the 1990s, and then more intensively since 2000, JFK’s leadership came to loom much larger in my own personal approach to public policy and global change, to the point that I sought to add to the voluminous library of Kennedy interpretation with my 2013 book To Move the World: JFK’s Quest for Peace. The passage of time and extensive research confirmed for me the first impressions of my youth. JFK’s life and example were special, and his loss was earth shattering. The intense emotion unleashed by his assassination were

My own desire to understand JFK’s leadership grew on me as I saw the retreat in the US from public purpose. If JFK had epitomised the
belief in public service, founding the Peace Corps and the precursor to AmeriCorps, Reagan ushered in an era of unrelenting and unprecedented attack on the public sector itself. If JFK had believed that the government could carry a man to the Moon and bring him back to Earth, all within the decade, Reagan told us that government itself was the source of our problems, inevitably corrupt and inefficient.

For a while, I attributed this turn of events to a temporary swing of the political pendulum, but when Bill Clinton, a supposed man of progressive ideals (and one who explicitly said that he looked back to JFK for inspiration) continued in the Reagan mode into the 1990s, I came to feel increasingly that, indeed, the US had lost its way, especially its sense of public purpose. Clinton famously “triangulated” rather than led, declaring a “middle way” between Left and Right. While claiming the coveted label of Centrist, in fact what he did was to cement the Reagan-era ethic that public purpose was out, that greed was in, and that the government’s role was to get out of the way of Wall Street and the new economy. In foreign policy, Clinton cashed in the “peace dividend” after the Cold War rather than upping the search for lasting solutions to festering global wounds of hunger, poverty, disease and regional conflicts.

For these reasons, I began to look more deeply at the JFK era, including his words, thinking and modes of leadership. I discovered for myself anew the beauty of his words, and how he had used his eloquence and charm to maximum benefit to change minds and make progress. I met and was deeply inspired by JFK’s closest adviser and intellectual alter ego. Theodore Sorensen had partnered with JFK on the greatest moral challenges facing America in those years, the challenges of peace and civil rights. Mostly I listened, to the treasure trove of speeches and press conferences of the Kennedy years, hearing for the first time the words, the intonations, the threads of logic and feeling that had riveted the world and that had led to the profound, ineffable sense of loss in the autumn of 1963.

Kennedy loved life and knew of its tragic possibilities, but beneath his winning smile, wit and eloquence lay a darker foreboding — JFK’s knowledge that death was always at the door, death that had claimed his elder brother and sister, death that had come so close to claiming his own life on countless occasions, death that would claim his newborn son Patrick just two days after his birth in the summer of 1963. Kennedy believed that we must live fully since we might at any moment die without purpose.

That ideally seeing a JFK, H. W. Bush, W. H. Clinton, and a society that has not only log-rolling and elections but, as he put it, also God’s work. Kennedy is the last US President for whom we sense that measure of encompassing purpose. Lincoln had it; Teddy Roosevelt and FDR had it; JFK had it; but no president since has evinced that powerful sense
of a higher purpose alongside the inevitably grubby and quotidian aspects of political life.

It is the job of a great leader not only to have a vision, but to convince others to see it and embrace it. In this, JFK triumphed repeatedly in his brief thousand days as President. Most importantly, he told us what we could accomplish if Americans joined in his hopes, and devoted their efforts to great challenges. He told us that we could put a man on the Moon by the end of the decade, and he told us why we would do it in words that still cast a spell:

“We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organise and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”

The Moonshot is a vivid example of a core tenet of JFK’s leadership style. He believed in setting goals, and in his incomparable Peace Speech, delivered in June 1963 in the quest for a nuclear test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union, JFK explained the importance of goal setting: “By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more manageable and less remote, we can help all people to see it, to draw hope from it, and to move irresistibly towards it.”

Another part of JFK’s leadership was his ability to join practical politics with our highest ethical calling. The two greatest challenges confronting JFK and America were the Cold War and civil rights. He grappled every day with these, often failing, but by 1963 finding his resonant voice and strategy on both. In the summer of 1963, after many missteps and dangers, including the Cuban Missile Crisis and worsening race relations, Kennedy put these issues on the highest moral plane, and in doing so helped to achieve historic breakthroughs.

Moreover, he did so in back-to-back speeches on peace (June 10) and civil rights (June 11). In his great Peace Speech, Kennedy helped Americans and Russians to imagine a new era of peaceful cooperation, setting peace on its most basic human foundations:

“When a man’s way[s] please the Lord,” the Scriptures tell us, “He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.” And is not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights: the right to live a natural providence; the right of human generations to a healthy existence?

The very next day he did the same with civil rights, in words that join Abraham Lincoln’s and Martin Luther King’s as among the boldest and freshest expressions of the meaning of America:
“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.

“The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated.”

JFK viewed himself as a “practical idealist”, who both knew the importance of ideals and vision and who understood the realities of life and politics. He raised our sights but also bid us to avoid fantasies. In speaking of the “infinite concept of universal peace and good will” he said: “I do not deny the value of hopes and dreams but we merely invite discouragement and incredulity by making [universal peace] our only and immediate goal.”

Most importantly, JFK powerfully viewed leadership as the opportunity to inspire collective action. Solutions, he knew, could not come just from the top; they must come from across society and across the world. For that reason, he was always bidding every fellow American, every fellow citizen of the world, to join in quests of higher purpose. Listening to JFK’s speeches one feels powerfully that he is speaking directly to us as peers, fellow warriors in valiant causes.

Just behold the peroration of JFK’s address to fellow world leaders at the UN in September 1963, after the signing weeks before of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty:

“Two years ago I told this body that the United States had proposed, and was willing to sign, a limited test-ban treaty. Today that treaty has been signed. It will not put an end to war. It will not remove basic conflicts. It will not secure freedom for all. But it can be a lever, and Archimedes, in explaining the principles of the lever, was said to have declared to his friends: ‘Give me a place where I can stand and I shall move the world.’...

“My fellow inhabitants of this planet: Let us take our stand here in this Assembly of nations. And let us see if we, in our own time, can move the world to a just and lasting peace.”

His fellow inhabitants were stirred. We remain stirred today.

Most fundamentally, JFK told us about our common purpose, always emphasising that what unites us is vastly deeper than what divides us. His words in the Peace Speech on our common humanity remain for me his most eloquent words, and of enduring importance:

“So let us not be blind to our differences, but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now 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."

**To Move the World: JFK’s Quest for Peace** by Jeffrey Sachs is published by The Bodley Head, £14.99 (ebook available)