

The Oregonian

Resurrecting the idealism of Robert F. Kennedy

Resurrecting the idealism of RFK I n the first week of June, in gatherings large and small, we will commemorate the 40th anniversary of the death of Robert F. Kennedy. Many of us will totter on the edge of his final words at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, then tumble into the screams and fractured camera angles that follow.

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Owing to the events of the past week, I may be desperate for a refresher course in the authenticity of heroes and the nature of discipline, but several landmarks in the final three months of Kennedy's life are much more worthy of our attention than his vanishing point.

There was the April night in Indianapolis when Kennedy climbed atop a flatbed truck and broke the news about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. "In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States," he said during a five-minute speech in which he never glanced at the notes in his hands, "it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in."

There was the April day during which Kennedy confronted a group of white medical students at the Indiana University Medical Center, pointing out that while they enjoyed their sanctuary of privilege and learning, black kids were carrying "the burden of the fighting in Vietnam."

When one of the med students countered, "Where are we going to get the money to pay for all the new programs you're proposing?" Kennedy didn't pull his punch.

"From you," he said.

There was that plunge into the Pacific near Astoria before Oregon's May primary. And there was the speech - - 40 years ago today -- at the University of Kansas in which Kennedy suggested we "confront the poverty of satisfaction, purpose and dignity that afflicts us all."

It is an intense and amazing speech, one of the first in which Kennedy used the lines from George Bernard Shaw, "Some people see things as they are and say why? I dream things that never were and say, why not?"

And its high point may be when Kennedy speaks of the country's corrosive materialism.

"Our gross national product, now, is over \$800 billion a year," Kennedy notes, but that figure "counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them.

"It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts

napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities."

Yet the gross national product "does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play," Kennedy continues. "It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages," and measures "neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country.

"It measures everything in short except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans."

In the weeks ahead, I hope we focus less on the man who's gone than the idealism that survives him. Deflated by King's murder, haunted by the death of his brother, Kennedy, after all, quoted Aeschylus from the back of that truck in Indianapolis:

"Even in our sleep, pain which can't forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

Let us then, Kennedy said, "contain the savageness of man and make gentler the life of the world."

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