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1000 Days

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1000 Days

Do you think Gerald Ford accomplished more in his time as president than JFK?

Both John F. Kennedy and Gerald R. Ford served as president for about 1,000 days. Which chief executive accomplished more? Let's look at the context as well as the record of each man's presidency.

Former President Gerald R. Ford with Hauenstein Center founding benefactor Ralph Hauenstein (right) and director Gleaves Whitney (left)

KENNEDY 1961

In 1961 the world had its share of trouble spots, and the nuclear arms race was escalating. (So what else is new?) But Kennedy inherited a nation that was in relatively good shape economically, militarily, culturally, and internationally. Economically the U.S. was emerging from the recession of 1958-1960, and on its way to unprecedented growth in the post-war boom. Militarily the U.S. was still the stronger superpower compared to the Soviet Union. Culturally the nation was not yet experiencing the burst of bitter divisions -- race riots, student unrest, Vietnam War protests, and assassinations -- that would mark the latter 1960s. And in foreign relations, the U.S. was still regarded as a moral superpower, beloved by allies in Europe, Asia, and throughout the Free World. The youthful president was wise to take advantage of the strong nation left by his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In this relatively sunny environment, there is no question that Kennedy inspired fellow citizens and people around the world with sparkling rhetoric and contagious idealism. At the Democratic National Convention in 1960, he challenged Americans to be pioneers on the New Frontier, where there were "uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus." To pull off such soaring rhetoric was a significant achievement in itself.

It was also an achievement to debate and defeat a tough opponent in sitting Vice President Richard Nixon. It was certainly an achievement to be the youngest man elected president (he was 43). It was an achievement to be the first Roman Catholic elected president. But when one actually looks at the record following Election Day, it is not particularly distinguished. And don't just take my word for it. At a Hauenstein Center event last October, historian Robert Dallek, who is sympathetic to Kennedy, made the point that JFK's domestic achievements were thin. They were especially thin compared to, say, the achievements of his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. Even though weighed down by Vietnam, LBJ got much more done domestically, not least of which were major tax cuts and the 1,000-bill Great Society. Also Johnson acted decisively on civil rights, whereas Kennedy was at first hesitant because he was afraid of alienating Southern Democrats.

Kennedy's record in foreign affairs was not the best, either. Most Americans are familiar with JFK's egregious error in judgment concerning the Bay of Pigs. Columnist George Will rightly calls the Bay of Pigs the most irresponsible use of White House power in the last 50 years. Nor did Kennedy's 1961 Vienna summit with Krushchev go swimmingly for the U.S. State Department notes indicate that Kennedy could not adequately assert the moral, political, and economic superiority of the Western way over the Communist way.[1] Indeed, Kremlin leaders came away from Vienna believing that Kennedy was weak -- or at least not strong enough to oppose East Germans erecting the Berlin Wall or Soviets putting nuclear missiles in Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis, in the end, was Kennedy getting himself out of the mess he himself helped create.

This is not to say that Kennedy's presidency was an utter failure, not at all. His personal elan made the office sparkle. Over the course of 1,036 days in office, his idealism, his sense of America's mission gave rise to the Peace Corps and steeled our resolve to stand by West Berlin. His Food for Peace program streamlined the delivery of American aid to developing nations. He set an ambitious but realizable goal for the fledgling space program (which had originated with Eisenhower). JFK advanced the notion of the rhetorical presidency, showing media savvy in the process. He projected his presidential persona extremely well, especially on the expanding medium of television. He gave the first live televised news conference, and went on to hold 64 in all -- on average, 1 every 16 days he was in office -- and charmed American viewers with his performance and wit.

Stylistic points aside, there were relatively few substantive achievements to which Kennedy apologists can point. Even the JFK Library and Museum in Boston subtly acknowledges the fact. One of the first panels that visitors read upon entering the museum downplays the expectations we should have of Camelot, asserting merely that the 35th president "*laid the groundwork* for advances in civil rights, education, and health care" [emphasis added].

FORD 1974

Barely a decade separated the end of JFK's presidency from the beginning of Gerald R. Ford's presidency -- but how our nation had changed during those brief years.

Ford didn't have the luxury of a swaggering, self-confident nation when he was sworn into office on August 9, 1974. He inherited an America that was under a black cloud. Because of Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation, the nation was backing its way into a constitutional crisis. Dishonor had befallen the very office of the presidency. Energy shocks were making our economy reel. Vietnam had severely wounded the nation's honor. Anti-Americanism was running high around the globe. And at home there was anger at Washington, at government, at anyone associated with Nixon and the presidency. Indeed, within his first thirteen months in office, Ford survived two assassination attempts.

In the face of these crises, Ford immediately set out to put the shame of Nixon and Watergate behind him -- and the country. Like Lincoln, he endeavored to bind up the nation's wounds. By sheer force of his character, he was the credible person to lead the effort. Because of his integrity, he was able to restore dignity to the office of the presidency. Because of his honesty, he was able to rebuild trust in America's word both at home and abroad. He possessed unshakable calm and kept the nation together at our darkest time since Pearl Harbor and Fort Sumter. He led the economy out of a stubborn recession. He held the Soviets' feet to the fire at Helsinki in view of their appalling human rights record. And he consistently displayed executive leadership and the courage of his convictions, not just in his "full, free, and absolute" pardon of Nixon and his limited offer of amnesty to Vietnam War draft dodgers, but in vetoing more bills than any other president in a comparable period of time (66 vetoes in 18 months, 54 of which prevailed after going back to Capitol Hill). He knew that many of his actions would not improve his chances of re-election in 1976.

Nor would the mistakes he made help re-election chances. During his 895 days in office, Ford alienated the conservative wing of the Republican party by selecting Nelson Rockefeller to be his VP and by proposing a temporary tax hike. His campaign to Whip Inflation Now was ridiculed as a PR stunt. The evacuation of Saigon in April of 1975 was ugly, as was the rescue the SS *Mayaguez* in international waters.

Nevertheless, constitutionally, politically, and morally, Ford led our nation out of a storm and into stability. As Henry Kissinger put it, "he saved the country. In fact, he saved it in such a matter-of-fact way that he isn't given any credit for it." Biographer James Cannon remarked, "He was the right man for this country at the right time in the most extraordinary crisis in the constitutional system since the Civil War."[2]

I told the reporter whose article you read that if you compare the two Cold War commanders in chief who served a thousand days, Ford in the end was the more heroic. The 38th president had a much tougher road to travel, and he did it with dignity and courage. He managed to accomplish much, despite the bad domestic and international hand he was dealt. It is no wonder that the JFK Library Foundation gave Gerald R. Ford its prestigious Profile in Courage award three years ago. As Senator Edward Kennedy remarked on the occasion, "I was one of those who spoke out against his actions then. But time has a way of clarifying past events, and now we see that President Ford was right. His courage and dedication to our country made it possible for us to begin the process of healing and put the tragedy of Watergate behind us."[3]

(Question from Pat S. of Grand Rapids, Michigan)

* Full question: [Editor's note: In a recent newspaper article, Gleaves Whitney was quoted as saying that Gerald R. Ford's administration accomplished more than John F. Kennedy's administration. That quotation prompted the following question.] Do you really think Gerald Ford accomplished more in his time as president than JFK? I had never heard this stated before so it caught my eye.

[1] Peggy Noonan, "John Fitzgerald Kennedy," *Presidential Leadership*, ed. by James Taranto and Leonard Leo (New York: Wall Street Journal Books, 2004), p. 171.

[2] Henry Kissinger and James M. Cannon are quoted in the new PBS documenary about the 38th president, *Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History*, produced by Mike Grass (Grand Rapids: WGVU Productions, 2004)

[3] Kennedy quoted in *Time and Chance;* the Profile in Courage award was given to President Ford on May 21, 2001.