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

By John Aell

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 unclassified
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UNSETTLING AND SEEKINGLY UNSETTLEABLE OBSESSION.

THE CONTROVERSY WAS REFUELED 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-TRUE AND UNTRUE.

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 GROWS, 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 SLIMMEST 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 KHURSHCHEV 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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