

The following response was written by G.V. Desani as part of an Editor's Questionnaire column which appearing in The Illustrated Weekly of India in the '60s.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1. *What do you think was the secret of John F. Kennedy's unique hold on the imagination of people the world over?***
- 2. *If he were alive today, would he have remained as popular in the context of the increasing tensions at home and abroad.***
- 3. *What, according to your assessment, was the most significant achievement of the Kennedy administration.***

J.F.K. As I Saw Him

by

G.V. Desani

- 1. What do you think was the secret of Kennedy's unique hold on the imagination of people the world over?*

I do not like the look of the first question and want to avoid the sequel: to wit, argue the word 'secret', define "unique hold", appraise "the imagination of people..." and essay "... the world."

Since nearly all the facts concerning the late President have been communicated by canny and highly paid agents, including the details of his personal pluses – his youth, gusto, style, eloquence, candor, the million-dollar fund from his father, and Mrs. Kennedy's obvious gifts, and her cultural background, her high dress sense, her patronage of creative artists, musicians and others – and a good deal about his aides, too, his obliging press secretary and the talented speech writer, Mr. Sorensen – I shall content myself with offering two glaring generalizations.

American affairs and Presidents fascinate because the world is fascinated by royalty, and wealth, power, success, dominance, action. Being so fascinated is a means of coping with the anxiety (caused from displays by royalty, of wealth ... etc.) by 'participation'. An anticipating Indian lady doctor flying posthaste from India to London – as the Queen was expecting a baby – was seen cutting circles around Buckingham Palace. On being asked why was she so conducting herself, she replied, "I want to be there when it happens." She was, without knowing it, 'participating': or, as Jimmy Durante used to say, "getting into the act" (... into somebody else's act).

Anyway, a President, who tells his enemies of not long ago, "... The U.S. would risk its own cities to defend yours" (Kennedy, at Frankfurt, during his 1963 triumphant European tour), or exclaims to the fold in Cologne, "... Cologne, where the Romans marched when (we) Bostonians were in skins," and ends with a hurrah for Cologne, or assures the Berliners, in their own tongue, "I am a Berliner!" – not forgetting the gay events in the land of his forefathers – would have "the secret" of a "unique hold on the imagination of people the world over." (The audience, graphically and photographically familiarized with these and other episodes would be "people the world over".)

My second generalization concerns a form of clashing called 'challenge'. Often a prelude to a conflict, challenge is a means of capturing attention (or imagination). Kennedy lived in stirring times and his post-World War II challenges to the Russians would further prove the point. (One such, revealing the strength of his character, was the naval blockade of '62, which caused Mr. Khrushchev to ship the Russian missiles from Cuba to Russia.)

2. *If he were alive today, would he have remained as popular in the context of the increasing tensions at home and abroad.*

Although – China excepted – there was worldwide grief at Kennedy's tragic death, it would be difficult to concede 'popularity'. (One might have tapped opinion, in the late President's day, or may tap it today in – say – Cuba, Panama, Moscow, Phnom Penh, Peking or Hanoi.)

Actually, the tensions at home are lessening tensions. President Johnson – voted in by the largest-ever popular vote – has had no trouble with big business such as Kennedy had with the steel-men. Kennedy's sponsored Civil Rights Bill is law and Mr. Johnson has squarely faced the (contemporaneous) aftermath. The tax-cut bill is passed. (Kennedy had fought for this, as he had for the Civil Rights bill.) Last year's threatened rail strike was ably averted by Mr. Johnson. His relations with Congress are better than Mr. Kennedy's were. He has avoided an incident similar to the Bay of Pigs, and he resolved, with credit, the Gulf of Tonkin action and so far (in spite of the reaction abroad, particularly from the latterly-thawed Russians) the Viet Nam situation. (From the United States point of view: relative to the American interest.)

Security Arrangements

Speaking of the tensions abroad, General Charles de Gaulle has not yet signed the test-ban treaty, has accepted the Chinese-asserted European independence of the United States, toyed with the notion of a French-led Third Force, and has made overtures (in person) to the Latin Americans (the Monroe Doctrine notwithstanding). If that is not enough, he has said (complains the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee (Senator J. William Fulbright) “the nastiest, meanest things about us” (Americans). The Indonesians, the Arabs, most Africans (including Mr. Gamal Abdel Nasser [Egypt] and excluding the unsinkable Monsieur Moise Tshombe [Republic of Congo]), Ceylon (the last, but not the present, government), Prince Norodom Sihanouk, nurse little or no goodwill for the U.S. Among the associates and juniors, the Persians, the Turks, King Hussein, the Greeks, and the SEATO- and CENTO-committed (defensive alliances with the United States against China and Russia) Pakistanis – annual U.S. aid \$400 million – are not so staunch and some have hiked as far as Beijing and Moscow “seeking friendship with all countries” (President Ayub Khan, back from his tour of China and Russia). Latin American relations are not what they might be and a North Viet Nam spokesman has addressed the most stable and desired currency in the world as “stinking dollars” (reacting to a billion of these offered by President Johnson) The Indians have published fewer anti-American notes, statements, aide-memoirs (not so much from agreement with the Americans, but rather from disagreement with the Chinese and their land survey). The British, and the Australians, although cordial, continue to trade with China and Cuba.

A conclusion that an impartial observer might draw from this situation is that most people require the United States to be consulted (with the right to veto) about such issues as the European alliance, South Viet Nam agreements, the Malaysian Federation, Israel, the Congo, Cyprus, arms supplies to Pakistan (the late Indian Prime Minister had strongly objected), arms supplies to India (Pakistan strongly objects), the U.S. intercontinental missiles program, the disposition of the American armed forces and fleets, the kind of gas used in Indochina and its chemical composition (all these matters merited sharp speeches from the late Indian prime minister and one recently from the present prime minister) instead of letting the United States go about its business, which is – first and foremost – self-interest, the American pragmatism (and, incidentally, the American idealism).

The U.S. has security agreements with over 40 countries. (It takes two to conclude an agreement. There is no evidence of coercion by the American ambassadors or consular personnel to terrorize people into signing such agreements.) The admitted purpose of these security concerns, in the strict political sense of the day, is the containment of the Communists (Russia, China, and their satellites). The strategy is directed to filling vacuums on land, on the high seas, in and around the continents, wherever needed, and in the air, and to place absolutely all the vulnerable points of the earth, and in the space above the earth, within the reach of American arms. In

pursuing this task, America assumes a more or less unavoidable imperial posture (to wage war or to enforce peace).

Idealism and Power

There is also the posture inspired by the American idealism – with its roots in Greece, in Christianity, and in the European and the American free thought of the century – dedicated to overcoming poverty, disease, want, need, hunger – the hunger for knowledge included – and the freedom from fear and political tyranny in certain special areas. Obviously, no country can possibly assume so much responsibility and not arm. The Defense Secretary, Mr. Robert McNamara, testifying before the Armed Forces and Joint Atomic Energy Committees, has provided certain estimates. The United States nuclear weapons alone, reckoned in megatons – a megaton equals roughly 1,000,000 tons of exploding TNT – is something absolutely beyond the wildest reach of the imagination of any conqueror known to history. (The Russian-owned arsenal, and Russia's equally amazing technology, the Chinese infantry potential and other Chinese accomplishments are not relevant to this Questionnaire.)

As sheer achievement, this is an entirely exciting thing, even a heroic thing. An offspring of this prodigious effort is the wonderful space program and the innumerable discoveries, the ceaseless search after understanding and mastering Nature's laws, not forgetting the most vigorous pursuit of the creative arts and the new art forms and techniques. The fruits of this effort by Twentieth Century man, exerting himself in Europe and in American, are available to a future government of the world; and are, today, [available] to the world. (The world is here reckoned as the underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa – omitting some Latin American and European countries to which the description underdeveloped might [also] apply.)

The Third Force

Bent on participation, the late Indian Prime Minister and others – before the Bandung, Indonesia meeting and after – had tried to organize and federate into the so-called Afro-Asian Third Force, to brave and stand up to the Two (the American-led Western and the Russian-led Eastern). The bases of the organization were emotional (not real). The two things in common which the members, so-called Afro-Asian, had was their backwardness and poverty and the then-justifiable anti-colonial passion. (Most of them had been the victims of European political and economic domination, and their leaders, of imprisonment and affront.) None among the active members, including China, had – or has today – economic self-sufficiency or anything like a European or an American standard of living.

Regardless of the ebullience – the Indian spokesmen were most vocal and convincing – the organization lacked any genuine basis because (apart from lacking any real force, power) it ignored the areas of disagreement among the Asians and

Africans themselves: historic, ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic. No effort was made to bridge those differences or even to acknowledge their existence or to investigate them. They did not show among the leaders – most of them educated and brought up in the Western traditions – but the differences among the masses were and are real.

The differences – “the way of life” – could mean such divergences as the legitimate Chinese stomach for beef and pork, and the emotional crisis – for instance – the prime Hindu of his day, Mahatma Gandhi, underwent after discovering that his wife had had some beef tea. He “preferred death.” The Hindus and the Muslims had killed and maimed an estimated 750,000 people at the time of the partitioning of India – Mahatma Gandhi’s pleading and Mr. Nehru’s pacific presence notwithstanding. Hindu-Muslim battles, murderous forays, kidnapping of women, of minors, raping and throwing of children into wells, used to take fire from such occurrences as playing music ‘loudly’ outside a mosque in Lahore, or from a cut of beef thrown inside a Hindu temple in Kanpur. Pakistani-Indian, Chinese-Indian, Indonesian-Indian relations (Between *bhais*, brothers, now “neighbors and enemies”) are worse today than they were at Bandung 10 years ago. (One can list similar smoldering possibilities all over Asia and Africa.)

An offshoot of the Afro-Asian Third Force emotionalism – based on looking big, and the infantile “*I take orders from nobody! I am my own master!*” – is the naïve notion of ‘non-alignment’ (with the United States or the Communists). There is the complacency, by association, automatically ‘aligning’ one; and ‘independence’ is a shoddy fallacy if you are begging for food and other succor, year after year, and from those you are ‘independent’ of. A more senile and retarded notion is that ‘non-alignment’ is achieved by taking aid from both sides. (Quite apart from the questionable ethics of such intentions and conduct, and the resulting ‘peace’ or ‘friendship’ without honor, with one or both.)

Such attitudes are acquired in the bazaars of Asia and Africa – bluffing, hedging, scolding, preaching peace, cadging, occasional subversion, confiscation, rioting, “student demonstrations”, opportunism, not honoring one’s words, etc., such means and techniques are not worthy of nations which must needs build up credit – to say the least. Political morality yields dividends, as does any sort of morality. “Honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none,” is not a quotation from Nehru or the recent Ayub Khan, but from President Jefferson of the United States. Such an air – the ideal of national independence – would need economic strength and the power of arms to uphold it. ‘Peace’ – comparative, absolute – as a basis of a nation’s foreign policy, or that of a combination of nations, is assured by military, political and economic power, and the will to survive with honor, and to that end lives are honorably risked and lost, often with one’s comrades and allies.

The so-called Third Force has no binding condition, moreover, and it had no sort of an expression of collective security, such as even the most powerful nation of its day, Germany pre-world War II, sought of Italy and Japan (after managing a near-

neutralization of Russia and the United States). The Allies, arrayed against Germany, ceded a similar need. (Only the strong can wage war or make peace.)

The spokesmen of the so-called 'non-aligned' countries pronouncing themselves on disarmament – among them the Indians were foremost – had not understood the concepts, 'deterrent' and 'preparedness'. "Smaller warships ... smaller wars. No warships might mean no wars," – thus Walter Lippmann, in 1943 – "is applicable, if at all, to Tibet, which has no foreign relations, cannot be invaded, is not worth conquering, has no outlying commitments...." The Tibetans, at home and in exile, and others, can better judge these words in 1965, and their obvious implications.

The New Capitalists

Lastly, the untaught and uninformed millions – the population, the so-called 'strength' of the Third Force – is as unreal an issue today as it was at Bandung. Actually, it is the 'self-made' amateur, the ambitious politician, the corrupt official, the unscrupulous profiteer, and the speech- and statement-maker – allowing for some new Asian-African ruling class – who has access to the masses, and who perpetuates him or herself, election after election, sometimes indulging in paternal domination, but often, as a class, succumbing to greed and acquisitiveness ... and is as likely to exact a toll as any imperial or colonial power might.

The pattern can be seen in the voting by the masses. Mr. Jules Nyerere, Tanzania, and Mr. Nasser drew 98% plus of the total vote. There is today, in too many Asian and African countries, a one-man and one-party rule. And there are arrayed against the masses the new capitalists (who have replaced the European capitalists, and most among them, and the worst, have not even the pseudo-Christianity of their predecessors). This is a new curse, a ruthless minority that preys – in the last analysis – on the hungry and the destitute, and, sooner or later, must and does oppose the governments which support it. A multi-party system of government, and a loud opposition, a free press, and an independent judiciary appear to be the only safeguards against this new tyranny – the rule of a politically illiterate electorate which is blind to self-interest (and that includes, definitely, checking its numbers).

All these issues are directly related to the post-World War II United States and to its worldwide commitments. Responsible public spokesmen have suggested to the U.S. administration that it should drop Asia and Africa from its aid program or, to a country like India – which goes on adding to its population without any restraint or direction from the Government – grant conditional aid.

3. What, according to your assessment, was the most significant achievement of the Kennedy administration.

Mr. Kennedy was President for not quite three years. He was campaigning for re-election, and so much was left undone as a consequence of his assassination.

Able American commentators have considered the nuclear test ban treaty as Kennedy's most significant achievement. If one were to gloss or doctor that judgment, it is that half or near-half of the achievement is Russian (Mr. Khrushchev's, who is no longer on the scene). Kennedy had described the test-ban treaty as "an important first step" to world peace. (Only the strong may make peace.)

Another thing – incidentally, a fit issue for the award of a *writ of mandamus* to somebody or other from an international grand jury – worth pondering might be the dictum: If you want peace, prepare for war.

In addition to minor editing, spelling and punctuation have been Americanized.

*G.V. Desani's writings and lectures are copyright © UNICEF.
All rights reserved.*