

FORTY FIVE YEARS



Where were you forty five years ago today?

If you were old enough to remember at all, then you undoubtedly remember where you were on Friday November 22, 1963 at 12:30 pm central standard time.

I was at a desk, two from the rear, in the left most row, in Mrs. Hollingshead's first grade class. Each kid had their own desk, and they were big, made out of solid wood and heavy. They had to be heavy, of course, because they were going to protect us when we ducked and covered from a Soviet nuclear strike. There were, as there were in most elementary school classrooms of the day, a large clock and a big speaker on the wall up above the teacher's desk.

I can't remember what subject we were working on, but the principal's voice suddenly came over the loudspeaker. This alone meant there was something important up, because that only usually occurred for morning announcements at the start of the school day and for special occasions. The voice of Mr. Flake, the principal, was somber, halting and different; perhaps detached is the word. There was a prelude to the effect that this was a serious moment and that the teachers should make sure that all students were at their desks and that all, both young and old, were to pay attention.

There had occurred a tragic and shocking event that we all needed to know about. Our attention was required.

Then the hammer fell and our world literally caved in.

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been assassinated. Shot and killed in Dallas Texas. Then without a moment's pause, we were told that the nation was safe, Vice-President Johnson was in charge, the government was functioning and that we need not have any concerns about our own safety. We were not at war.

Twenty four some odd little hearts stopped, plus one from Mrs. Hollingshead. You could literally feel the life being sucked out of the room like air lost to a vacuum. Many of us began looking out the window, because no matter what Mr. Flake said, if our President was dead, we were at war and the warheads were coming. They had to be in the sky. They were going to be there.

Unlike the hokey color coded terror alerts, ginned up fear mongering of Bush, Ashcroft and Tom Ridge, things were dead nuts serious at the height of the cold war. If President Kennedy had been killed, we were at war; the missiles were on their way. Had to be. Looking back, the school officials and teachers had to have been as devastated and afraid as we were, yet they were remarkable. They kept themselves in one piece, held us together, talked and comforted us into calm.

We had not been back in class from lunch break for long; it was still early afternoon in the west. Before the announcement was made, the decision by the school officials had been made to send us home. The busses would be lined up and ready to go in twenty minutes. Until then there would be a brief quiet period and then the teachers would talk to us and further calm the situation. Then off we would go to try to forge a path with our families, who would need us as much as we needed them.

Except for me and a handful of other kids. My mother was an educator and was not at home, so I and a few other similarly situated kids were kept at school until we could be picked up. Somehow it wasn't right to be inside, so we all, along with another teacher, Mrs. Thomas, went outside and sat underneath a large palm tree in front of the school. We talked about how it could be that our President, our hero, our king, was dead. Maybe he wasn't really dead, maybe it was all a mistake. Maybe Soviet troops were on their way; possibly tanks. This kind of excited me and the other boys; we perked up at this thought, tanks were cool. The Russians probably

had awesome tanks. Each minute that passed made us feel a little better because there were no missiles in the sky. That was a good sign.

In about half an hour, maybe an hour, I don't know any more, my mother drove up and off we went. My mother was also reassuring. It was good to be with her; mom saying it would all be alright meant a lot. Once home, we ate and sat dumbstruck and transfixed in front of the Curtis Mathes console television the rest of the afternoon and night. We watched Walter Cronkite on CBS and Chet Huntley and David Brinkley on NBC. These men were giants of news and journalism; to say that they don't make them like that anymore is a understatement of untold proportion. Things slowly, but surely, stabilized; but it took awhile. A long while.

Well, that was my day forty five years ago. What was your day? Take a moment and reflect back and share with those of us that know the traumatic event, and help those who are younger to understand what the day was like. The palpable sorrow. The sinking, abiding fear. The comfort of teachers, friends and family.

There may be another Kennedy like figure in our midst, Barack Obama. He stands to assume office in a similarly, albeit it from different factors, troubled time. The world roils and America's existence hangs in the lurch; not from Soviet missiles, but our own selfishness, avarice and stupidity. To draw a parallel, I have included the inaugural speech given by JFK (due to time restrictions of YouTube, it is in two parts). Once again, it is time for the citizens of this country to ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country. Let us do one other thing folks, let's make sure this inspirational, young, vibrant leader, that we need so desperately to bring the voice and inspiration to get this country moving again – as we did with JFK – let's make sure he doesn't suffer the same fate.