

Legacy of hope lingers

Fifty years after his assassination, RFK still inspires

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He was making his way through the crowded kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, shaking hands with an admiring busboy, when the shots rang out and he sank to the floor, mortally wounded. It was just past midnight, June 5, 1968, and he had just won the California primary, a big prize in his quest for the Democratic presidential nomination. Robert Francis Kennedy would die the next day at the age of 42.

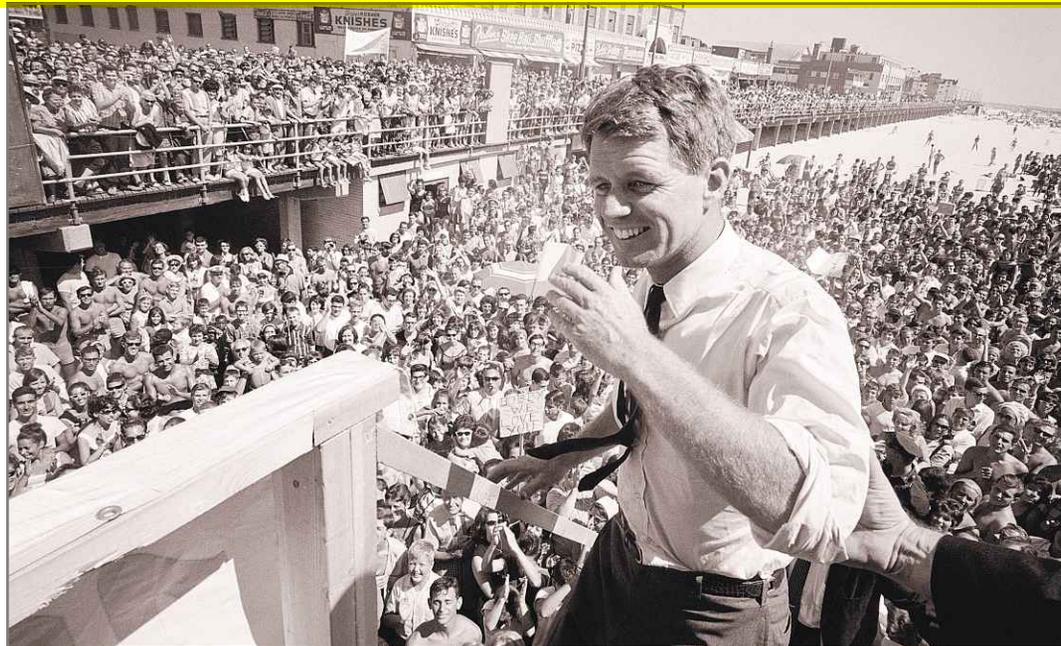
As America marks the 50th anniversary of his death, it grapples with some of the same issues it did then — conflicts over race and class, lingering war overseas — and considers the legacy of a man who represented such great hope to so many.

“He’s larger than life, but it’s who he was, what he stood for — and the strength, the passion, with which he stated his view of what justice is — that characterizes him so clearly,” said Peter Edelman, a professor at Georgetown University Law School, who served as Robert Kennedy’s aide. “That’s why the memories are there.”

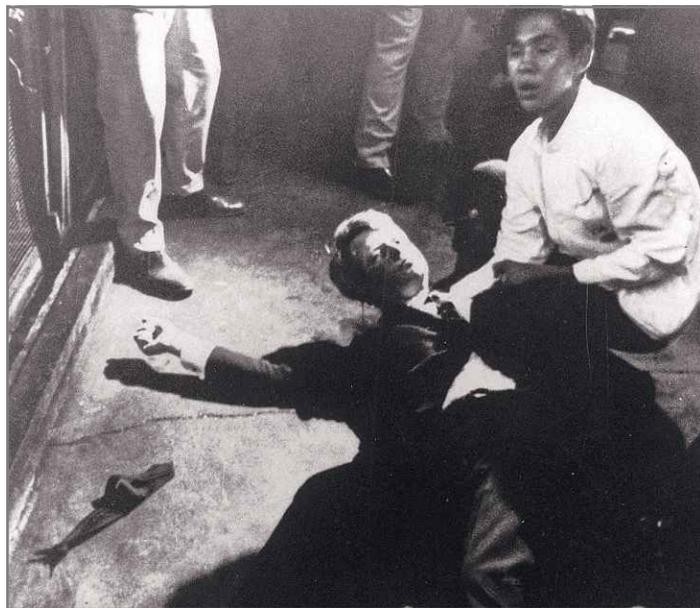
Historians, former staffers and former supporters say Kennedy is remembered for the unrealized promise he embodied and the potent inspiration his memory still offers as a champion of working people, minorities and the downtrodden.

“The idea of saying what you mean, meaning what you say, respecting people and listening to people and connecting with people, going to places where other candidates don’t bother to go, those are things that transcend the specifics,” Edelman said in an interview.

Kennedy had already accomplished much by the time of his death. He managed his elder brother John F. Kennedy’s successful Senate and presidential campaigns. As attorney general he confronted organized crime and enforced federal school desegregation orders. He advised his brother through the Cuban missile crisis and helped for-



Robert F. Kennedy addresses a crowd in Long Beach during his campaign for Senate on Sept. 6, 1964.



LOS ANGELES TIMES / BORIS YARO VIA AP

mulate what later became historic civil rights legislation.

As U.S. senator from New York, Kennedy highlighted hunger and stunted opportunities from Appalachia to the Mississippi Delta to migrant labor camps and the inner cities, while advocating for democracy and human rights abroad.

But his early death meant his legacy was “one of unfulfilled promise,” said Meena Bose, a political science professor and executive dean at Hofstra University, where she is also director of its Peter S. Kalikow Center for the Study of the Ameri-

can Presidency. “It was a legacy more of advocacy than policy.”

And Kennedy’s legacy was not unblemished. He worked briefly on the committee staff of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, a Wisconsin Republican, notorious for hunting American Communists, often with scant evidence. Kennedy announced his run for president — challenging incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson — only after anti-war candidate Sen. Eugene McCarthy did well in an early primary. He was often described as “ruthless.”

But it was Kennedy’s “politics of inspiration,” Bose said, that



Left, in a June 5, 1968, photo, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy is seen wounded after being shot in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Above, the front page of Newsday announces his death the following day, June 6, 1968.

drew many young people into lifelong political engagement.

That was true for Ed Rollins, a longtime Republican campaign consultant who directed the Reagan-Bush 1984 presidential campaign. He is a senior presidential fellow at the Kalikow Center.

Rollins’ first campaign job was as a campus coordinator for Kennedy’s presidential race. “He was my political hero. He inspired young people. He was an extraordinary man.”

Rollins said that “there was a toughness to him that was important to his appeal,” and speculated that, had Kennedy lived,

he might have brought the country together in that time of turmoil and war, and changed the course of the Democratic Party. “I don’t think he would have lost the blue-collar worker if he did,” said Rollins.

What still resonates for Rollins is the force of Kennedy’s presence. “He cared deeply about people. He never looked through you — he talked to you,” Rollins recalled in an interview. “I’ve known a lot of politicians in my career, and he was one of the most charismatic.”

To Hofstra history Professor Carolyn Eisenberg, Kennedy represented a political figure who “would bring together groups that were splintering . . . and was able to find a place to stand where white working-class people, black people and young people could still find common ground.”

His assassination, after the murders of his brother and Martin Luther King Jr., contributed to a sense in the country that “things were awry and out of control.”

How an RFK presidency might have changed history has always been the subject of tantalizing speculation, according to the academics and former staffers who admire him. Might he have ended the Vietnam War sooner and saved thousands of lives? Kept Nixon from the presidency and the Watergate scandal? Initiated more programs to end poverty? Stanching the economic changes that have led to the loss of well-paying working-class jobs and a long slide into wage stagnation?

Rollins said he believed that Kennedy “could have brought the war home earlier. He was more of a healer, and there was a magic to his name. I think he was tougher than John Kennedy, and he would have made some tough decisions.”

Edelman looks at the changes in the economy that began in the 1970s, from high-wage, blue-collar manufacturing jobs to low-paid service jobs, and thinks Kennedy might have been quicker to recognize them and react.

Whatever Kennedy’s larger legacy, he still has the power to inspire and comfort, Edelman said. “He’s stayed with me,” he said. “I have his picture all over my office. It cheers me up every day.”

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