

Panel deflates JFK 'myth'

By Kathy Parriah
staff writer

Is John F. Kennedy truly a "hero for our times?" Or did martyrdom make the 35th president seem bigger than life?

"When a person becomes a martyr, his personal achievements are forgotten and his ideals magnified," said DeWitt Dykes, associate professor of history at Oakland University, during a panel discussion on "Realities and Myths: John F. Kennedy the Person."

"That's why we need to put him in perspective."

DURING ONE of three discussions marking the 20th anniversary of Kennedy's death, the OU panel tried to do just that.

About 20 students and faculty heard two historians and a campus minister debunk the Kennedy "myth." And for some — too young to remember the Kennedy era — it was a sobering experience.

"I've always been led to believe that one of Kennedy's greatest achievements was that he acted decisively during the Cuban Missile Crisis," said one young woman.

"But that's not what you're telling us. Why weren't we told these things?"

DURING THE noontime discussion, the panelists compared Kennedy to two other legends — Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They pointed out that all three had charisma which appealed to voters.

But the educators agreed JFK's actions just didn't put him in a league with those American heroes.

"When Kennedy ran against Nixon (in 1960), he was very popular because he represented something tangible; he represented a vigorous, forceful man with intentions," said history Professor Patrick Strauss, adding that as a U.S. senator, Kennedy initiated liberal legislation but usually voted as a moderate.

"Kennedy was a myth. He was not liberal or progressive, but in many ways a conservative."

DYKES CREDITS Kennedy with being a "good enough president to put on the right image." And for surrounding himself with the "right people."

"He had the quality of seeing the best public relations gesture and course of action. In choosing the image he chose the one that played the best," he said.

Dykes, who teaches black history, believes Kennedy made some strides on behalf of minorities through executive orders and proposed legislation. But he doubts Kennedy could have persuaded Congress to pass as strong a law as the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

And Strauss agreed. "Kennedy's relations with members of Congress he served with just weren't that good," said the historian, who believes President Lyndon Johnson got the legislation through because he had been a Senate leader. "Kennedy was a follower."

ALL THREE speakers see the Cuban Missile Crisis as Kennedy's biggest mistake — one that could have had disastrous results.

In 1962, Kennedy imposed a blockade on Cuba to keep the Soviet Union from bringing in more missiles. The crisis was resolved when the Soviets disbanded the bases.

"The Cuban Missile Crisis was the ultimate test of brinkmanship, and I think it could have been handled differently," said Strauss, who believes the episode could have resulted in nuclear war.

"I just don't think it was the best thing for us," Dykes credited Kennedy with not "invading Cuba and getting us into a shooting match. But obviously the Bay of Pigs was a big mistake."

CAMPUS MINISTER Eric Kolbell, who is involved in peace work, said, "Twenty-one years later people still read the Cuban Missile Crisis as a unilateral act of Soviet aggression. And of course, it wasn't."

The educators are uncertain what history would say about Kennedy if he had served a second term.

"I think probably for the next 20 years, people will talk about myths and realities of Kennedy — who knows what Ted will bring us?" said moderator Paul Franklin, OU's coordinator of campus programs.

"But we probably never will know the realities."

BUT TO KOLBELL, it's no surprise that JFK is even more of a hero 20 years after his death.

"We as a culture need myths," said the campus chaplain, who thinks Kennedy's charismatic personality and martyrdom combine with America's "basic need to have that kind of myth."

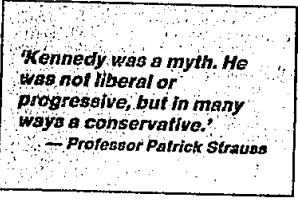
"The myth is not a lie, but it is not to be seen as historical fact. It meets certain needs in society. If we don't have a hero, we will invent him," added Kolbell.

"We all need a vision of Camelot. We need that to aspire to."



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— Chaplain Eric Kolbell



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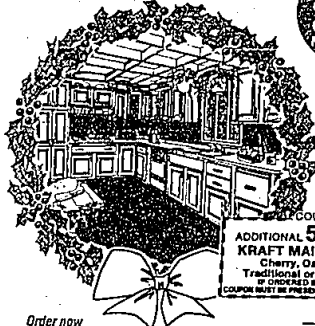
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UF Torch Drive nears 45% mark

United Foundation Torch Drive volunteers announced today that \$20.2 million, or 44.8 percent of this year's \$45 million goal, has been raised to date.

The announcement was made at the second report meeting at the Book Cadillac Hotel by Torch Drive chairman Thomas F. Russo, chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Federal-Mogul Corp.

Representing the metropolitan Detroit-area banks and financial institutions, Michigan National Bank of Detroit president Andrew Brodun reported contributions of nearly \$2.4 million, or 10.1 percent of quota.

ADDRESSING more than 350 volunteers, Brodun said, "In these difficult times, the banking and financial institutions have once again demonstrated their concern for the residents of the metropolitan Detroit area and are reporting significant increases from their 1982 gifts. Their outstanding support of the 1983 Torch Drive will help meet the increased needs of our community."

Reports from four campaign units showed:
• Industrial Unit — \$2.7 million, 53.9 percent of quota.
• Commercial Unit — \$3.5 million, 51 percent.
• Service Unit — nearly \$3 million, 45.1 percent.
• Schools, Government and Professions Unit — \$2.2 million, 49.2 percent.

New ideas.