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Remember JFK Not for His Assassination, but for His Civil Rights Advocacy

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Although most Americans today have no living memory of President John F. Kennedy, we are reminded of his assassination this week, as we have been every year since November of 1963. No incontrovertible new evidence about the Kennedy assassination has emerged in six decades. Speculation and conspiracy theories about “what really happened” abound and continue to fascinate. They do so at the expense of what is truly worth remembering and memorializing about Kennedy’s final months as president.

In the summer and fall of 1963, Kennedy called upon Americans to address what he described as a “moral crisis” confronting the nation—the continued reality of racial injustice in the United States. The steps he took and the message he conveyed made a deep impression on his fellow citizens. They remind us today of how consequential a President’s words, demeanor, and approach to a riven citizenry can be at difficult turning points in the nation’s history.