

Chords of remembrance: A family's commitment to public life

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

Now that we know his flaws, not many of us can romanticize John F. Kennedy or his presidency. And the glamour of the Kennedy clan has been tarnished considerably in recent years as scholars and reporters have pointed out its members' various shortcomings.

Despite all this, the death of John F. Kennedy Jr. has struck a chord of remembrance and recognition for me, as it has for many, and it has been a cause for grief—even despite the sometimes exploitative media focus on the event. What I mourn is not only the premature death of a gifted young man, but the continuing tragedy of a family that has been a presence in our lives and the life of the nation for four decades.

And something more: As president, JFK instilled hope in a nation that was beginning to feel stale and tired. The essence of the New Frontier was the conviction that things don't have to be the way they are, things can be better for our nation—more just, more equal, more excellent, and for each of us. The name for that conviction is hope. And President Kennedy's great gift, which stands out over the less-admirable aspects of his life, was that he reawakened hope.

He did something his predecessors had difficulty accomplishing: he inspired ordinary people to want to serve their nation and their community. He spoke to something dormant in people's souls, and he made public service appealing. His vision of a world more peaceful and just may have been overly ambitious, and his domestic agenda tentative, but his efforts on behalf of civil rights were nevertheless crucial—they were the reason many of us became vocal about and involved in the civil rights movement.

The 1960 election was the first presidential election in which I voted. Along with the rest of my family, I cast my ballot for the Republican ticket. But Kennedy soon made a convert of me. His account of risk-taking politicians, *Profiles in Courage*,

encouraged a generation of people to take risks for what they believed. He called many of us out of our pulpits and into our communities.

John Kennedy Jr. handled his celebrity with his father's grace. His involvement in publishing was, I always thought, a prelude to some greater involvement in public life. His death feels like a sad closure of an era, and it reminds me again of the great commitment to public life that his family has made and of the price they have paid for that commitment.

His father's famous call in his inaugural address to "ask not what your county can do for you, but what you can do for your country," sounds naïve these days. It's a sentiment out of step with a culture that puts a premium on personal gain, personal success, personal fulfillment, personal gratification.

But the idea of investing one's life in the community, giving life away to the neighbor, losing one's life for the sake of one's convictions—this notion should be familiar to those who follow the one who said that to lose one's life is to find it. Such ideas are often lost in the midst of anxieties about institutional survival or church growth.

So, as the Kennedys mourn another family member whose life was cut short, I mourn with them, and at the same time feel grateful for the commitment to public service that this family helped inspire.