

JFK — The Promise of What might Have Been A Personal Remembrance of the 35th US President

David Pitts writes from Washington

The author who is a USIA Staff Writer lived the Kennedy years as a young boy growing up in England. He wrote this article to make the 30th anniversary of the president's death, which will occur November 22.



1963: President John F. Kennedy shaking hands with young Bill Clinton on a visit to Washington, DC.

HAD he lived, John F. Kennedy would now be 76, a sobering thought for a generation that came of age during his New Frontier and now is middle-aged or older. It is a generation that cannot forget him even though it will be 30 years this November since that bad day in Dallas.

He came to the office in 1961, our youngest president elected by the slimmest of margins. Yet when he was assassinated 1,000 days later, the world was united in grief.

The passage of time has inevitably resulted in a reevaluation of his accomplishments. We have learned to separate his rhetoric from his actions, his vision from his policies, his write from his wisdom.

But in the world of the early 1960s, Kennedy faced no easy task. From the beginning, his Camelot was beset by foreign policy crises unrivaled in gravity in the post-war world.

How to deal with communism in Cuba and southeast Asia, the threat from Nikita Khrushchev over West Berlin, and threatening crises elsewhere such as the Congo (now Zaire), dominated the attention of the young president and the bright, young men he brought to Washington.

Despite the intractability of many of these problems, there were clear successes that helped forge a new image for the United States as a country not only committed to a safer world, but a more caring world. The Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress, and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty were all shining examples of America at its best.

There also were bold new attempts to fight poverty and racial discrimination that generated a new spirit of hope not at home but also overseas.

But it is not the achievements, or the failures, of the Kennedy years that we remember, nor even the contradictions in this most complicated of men. What we remember is that John Kennedy made us feel we could remake the world, that we are the masters of our own destiny on this planet, that mankind is not doomed, that "on earth," as he said, "God's work must truly be our own."

That is no mean accomplishment, despite falling short of his promise as we all do.

I was a young boy growing up in England when I watched the Kennedy Inaugural Address. We had to wait a full 24 hours to see it. This was in the days before satellites when videotape arrived by airplane much delayed. I recall being mesmerized by the speech, even though, at 13, I did not understand its implications.

Europe, as much as America, took John Kennedy to its heart that day, and for two years and ten months America's reputation shone more brightly than at any time before or since. To Europeans, he seemed the quintessential American ideal — youthful, successful, energetic, optimistic, informal, yet possessing great style.

When he visited the continent during his final summer of life in 1963, Europeans went wild, especially in Ireland, his ancestral birthplace. Yet it was

as much John Kennedy the man they loved, as John Kennedy the president.

To Europe's wily old leaders — DeGaulle in France, Adenauer in West Germany, MacMillan in England — Kennedy's New Frontier seemed naive. But Europeans were enchanted. Lord Harlech, the British ambassador in Washington at the time, said, "Everybody liked being led by the United States at that time. They liked to have President Kennedy as leader of the Western world."

It is a tribute to Kennedy's remarkable foresight that, despite the end of the Cold War, many of the issues he articulated so vigorously in the early 1960s are still at issue 30 years later — the need to stop proliferation of nuclear weapons, the fight for racial justice, the worldwide chasm between poverty and plenty.

Inevitably, we are prone to wonder what kind of country,

what kind of world would there be had John Kennedy lived, a nagging question long lost to history. As the French ambassador said at the time of his death, quoting Stendhal, "He was a brilliant maybe."

That is what still haunts Kennedy's generation today — the promise of what might have been, the pain of dreams unfulfilled. For us, he became a metaphor, not only for the fragility of hope, but for the awful uncertainty of life.

Adlai Stevenson, then US ambassador to the United Nations, spoke to this feeling of lost promise in perhaps the most eloquent remembrance of John Kennedy given shortly after his death. "President Kennedy," he said, "was so contemporary a man, so involved in our world, so immersed in our terms, so responsive to its challenges, that he seemed the very symbol of the vitality and exuberance that is the essence of life itself. Now he is gone. Today, we mourn him. Tomorrow and tomorrow, we shall miss him. And so we shall never know how different the world might have been had fate permitted his blazing talent to live and labor on man's unfinished agenda for peace and progress for all."

The world is very different now than it was in the early sixties. We are, as they say, in an era of limits. But those of us who lived through those years will never forget the Boston-accented voice urging us on, doing the things that must be done to make life what it ought to be for all mankind.

If he had not been murdered 30 years ago, he would of course no longer be young, nor perhaps even vigorous. But I venture to assert he would still be involved, still committed to man's unfinished agenda of peace and progress for all.

On one occasion, he spoke of his hopes for America, words still relevant in 1993:

"I look forward to a great future for America, a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral restraint, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our purpose. I look forward to an

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THE four Ps — poets, potentates, princes and politicians appear to be strange bed-fellows. If two kings cannot live under one blanket as claimed by Sheikh Saadi, two poets, perhaps, cannot agree even to buy a blanket. Additionally, if all of them are endowed with the intellectual quality of composing verses, the entire Zodiac is within their control. Beware of all of them. The ability to verify when takes a commoner to the royalty, he basks in the royal glory. A wrong step could send him to the gallows as well.

King Frederick the Great of Prussia, born as a prince but by cultivation aspiring to be a poet, invited French writer-historian, Voltaire, to adorn his court. Voltaire loved princes and poetry, loved money perhaps much more, the invitation lured him to royal grandeur. The day he left Paris, Frederick commented: The name of a stupid and added to that of Prussian capital. To prove him worth the salt, Voltaire while improving Frederick's poem replaced one bad French word with a better one. While doing so, Voltaire was oblivious of the royal prerogative, which at times, could change the whole dictionary. This affront cost him his job, dignity and what he never had — peace. A poet was sent adrift the sea of misery for many years.

Roman Poet Ovid (43BC) loved romance and extolled it beyond all proportions. The moment the poet entered the royal backyard to versify the philandering of King Augustus' grand daughter, he lost royal favour, was exiled at a desolate island where he died unwept, unsung and uncared.

Poets or painters, artists or ascetics, buffoons or beggars deserve to be pampered generously if resources permit, or parried at a distance but don't taunt them or tarnish their image, if they have any. This advice has come down to us from a wise man of third century BC.

He was Kautilya alias Chanakya, the celebrated diplomat-Minister of Chandragupta Maurya. He has gone on record for vilifying them wholesale. It might not have assassinated their character, but it was, for all practical purposes, public slaughtering of their tool and trade. Kautilya advised us not to believe them

Distant Drum M N Mustafa

In general because, he claimed, their tools and trades were not conducive to healthy growth of the society.

In all probability, Chanakya's consort (with apology to madam Chanakya) must have either been a poet or an artist of some repute. Her husband might have failed either to appreciate her talents or control her feminine emotions with masculine prowess. Instead, he hurt her womanly feelings. Consequently, she was constrained to use her tongue to tear open and demolish his manliness which the Greater bestowed niggardly on Chanakya. Disgruntled women tend to avenge short coming of their consorts in this manner. Mary Lincoln disparaged the 1864 speech of President Lincoln. And Chanakya in exercising his legitimate right of self defence hurled back the abuse on the whole community.

The poets and potentates throughout ages, discovered each other's faculties or faults. The poets praised the princes and potentates in rhymes and rhythm. In return, they received largesse in generous measure. From thatched cottages or squalls, the poets travelled to court of splendour, ate and slept well and snag sonorously in return for the dole or dinar. Poet Milton and Goethe too, toed this line, the minor legion of versifiers followed suit. The kings maintained their soothsayers at state expense, though the eulogy was hardly public asset. There were some, including Sultan Salahuddin Ayubi, the celebrated crusader, who forbade poets to compose verses praising him before or after his death. But exception does not make the rule.

Lord Clive who came to India with an annual salary of five pounds sterling was prosaic in composition and temperament, but loved poetry despite his apparent poverty. He married Margaret, an orphan, because she too loved poetry. In the epic of Clive's rise and fall, Margaret was as enchanting as a poem. Himself a poet of some merit,

Caliph Harunur Rashid of the Abbasides was an ardent lover of poetry and poets. His son, Mamun, loved a slave girl whom the royal blood could not accept in wedlock. He composed a poem extolling love and recited it before Caliph at his behest. It moved the Caliph and he received royal approval for marriage.

For one brief laudatory ode Caliph Harun gave poet Marwan a robe of honour, five thousand gold dinar (US dollars 23,750), one horse and ten Greek slave girls. His boon companion was the libertine poet Abu Nuwas; repeatedly angered by poet's insolence or open immorality, the Caliph was repeatedly mollified by exquisite verse. He gathered an unparalleled galaxy of poets and judged their works with discriminating taste, rewarded them abundantly and was repaid by a thousand metrical dogologies.

Emperor Aurangzeb, noted for his anti-music stance, was indulgent towards Mirza Niamat Khan, who hit the emperor hard with his satirical quatrains. The emperor digested the censure with exemplary benevolence.

Abbaside Caliph Hisham loved poetry and used to quote from memory lines of poetry relevant to any subject. Once he forgot an important piece of poetry he recited the poem. The Caliph's appreciation overwhelmed the poet with unprecedented gifts — fifty thousand dinars (US \$2,375,000) and two beautiful slave girls.

Abul Ala Al-Maarrri, a blind Arab poet of tenth century, never wrote a line at the behest of princes or potentates. In his poem, never he used a word in praise of the ruler. This narrowed down his sources of bread which was always scarce. He earned a paltry sum of thirty dinars annually which he shared with his servant. He avoided flesh and fowl and lived on vegetables. Never he donned any foot gear made of animal skin and used, instead, wooden slippers. When he died at the age of 84, his bier was carried by 180 poets and 84 savants

rected eulogies at his grave.

Sultan Mahmud's court at Ghazni was adorned by a galaxy of about 400 poets, one being Abul Kashem Mansur who worked hard to amass wealth and versified a huge prose work 'Khadainama' which he renamed as 'Shahnama' and approached Sultan Mahmud for some kind of dole. Sultan Mahmud appreciated the work but suggested some modification. The Sultan handed over huge volumes of historical documents to Ferdausi for incorporation. Ferdausi and Sultan struck an earthly bargain — the poet was to receive one gold dinar (\$4.70) for each couplet. The whole work, when completed, contained 60 thousand couplets. On being told by jealous poet Anarsi that the Sultan was paying too much for too small a work, the deal foundered. Ferdausi, instead, was paid silver dirhams. The poet in anger and scorn gave it to a public bath attendant and a serbat vendor. To avoid reprisal from Sultan, Ferdausi fled his home and took refuge with a book seller at Herat. Prince Shahriar of Tabristan later gave him shelter. Here he composed a satire almost calling Sultan Mahmud by any vulgar name. Prince Shahriar foresaw the punishment which this satire might bring for Ferdausi. He bought the poem at an exorbitant price of 100,000 dirham and destroyed it instantly. The satire was lost but a poet was saved.

Ten years later Sultan Mahmud relented. He decided to honour his deal. He sent a caravan to Tus containing indigo worth 60 thousand gold dinars and a letter of apology. As the caravan entered Tus, it passed by a bier which contained the mortal remains of poet Abul Kashem Mansur alias Ferdausi.

Ferdausi had gone down in history as a sad paradigm. He failed to collect his fee for trusting greatness in rhymes on others. He did not heed Khayyam's advice on cash deals. Modern poets, however, have grown wiser. They do not praise under delayed or deferred payment system. They either collect in advance or deliver on cash. They know unfounded praises are like dazzling drops of dew on grass edges. As the sun rises they disappear along with those for whom these are meant.

The British Council Language Matters

The Language Lab

In this column we want you to write to us about any little problems that you have with English and we will see if we can 'analyse' them. We will try to give the best answer possible in the space available.

Today's question is a little different to recent ones. It is more directly to do with a point of grammar.

Sahin Ikbal writes:

A few days ago I saw a headline in a paper. It said "When shall he get a pension?"

My question is why did they use 'shall' instead of 'will'?

To answer this, I will limit myself to standard modern usage of 'shall' and 'will'.

Generally speaking there is a rule that 'shall' is only used with the first person singular and plural (I & We). 'Will' is used in the second and third persons (you, she, they etc).

In practise the use of 'shall' is becoming less and less common. One reason for this is linked to reduction in speech which is discussed elsewhere on this page. In most cases neither 'will' nor 'shall' is actually said. There will be a contraction: for example,

I'll come to see you later.

or

He'll bring some books with him.

Because of such contractions, the distinction between 'shall' and 'will' is becoming blurred. Even when the auxiliary is stressed, it is now quite uncommon for

anyone to say 'I shall come to see you later.'

'Shall' is still common in some contexts though:

the function of offering to do something, eg...

'Shall I get you a glass of water?'

or

asking for suggestions....

'What shall we do?'

A brief answer to Sahin's actual question then is that this is not the normal usage of 'shall' and the question should read 'When will he get a pension?'

If you want to write to us with any questions you have, simple or complicated, please write to The Language Lab, c/o The Daily Star.

Reductions in Spoken English

Dictionaries are generally a very good guide to the pronunciation of a word, but they cannot give the whole picture. What they do is give the standard pronunciation of a word spoken in isolation. This is called the 'idealised form'. But as many non-native speakers of English discover, this is not necessarily the way a word is pronounced by native speakers in the context of a 'stream of speech'.

What happens is that individual sounds become reduced, or even disappear. This usually happens at the beginning or end of a word, but it can happen in the middle too. For example, you are probably all familiar with the very common omission of an initial 'h' - as in *You can't have it*. The word 'to' is very often reduced to a single sound, 't' - as in *I want to know how to do it*. And the most usual pronunciation of the word 'not' leaves out the 'o', as in *can't, haven't, don't* etc. This is not lazy speech - it's simply what happens naturally when English is spoken at anything but a slow pace.

Sometimes, these reductions can lead to the loss of a whole syllable. Here are some examples:

secret'ry	necess'ry
lib'r'y	the'r'y
comf'table	veg'table
om'lette	cam'ra

Of course, if you use the 'idealised form' there will be no problem - everyone will understand you perfectly. The problem often comes when you are listening to someone speaking at a reasonable speed. A word or phrase or sentence you would have no problem with if it were written down can become unintelligible in speech because of all the reductions.

Most people for whom English is a foreign or second language never acquire a native-speaker accent, but if you want to get just a little bit closer, it's worth practising these omissions - they are an intrinsic part of standard spoken English. Even if you are quite happy with your own pronunciation (and if people can understand you, then it's good enough), it's worth being aware of these features in the speech of others - it might help you 'process' their messages more efficiently.

Try saying these sentences, leaving out the sounds in brackets:

She wante(d) (t)o wash (h)er (h)ands.

He wa(s) so su(r)pris(ed) that (h)e dropp(ed) th(e) can(ce)rra.

She wasn'(t) the(re) so I left(t) my card wi(th) th(e) secret(ary).

Thi(s) sofa is extrem(e)ly comf(or)table.

Mahboub (a)n(d) Tuher w(ere) lookin(g) f(or) th(e) libr(ary).

It's no(t) necess(ary) (t)o pronounce a(l)l th(e) lett(er)s in a wo(r)d.

Examinations: Tests Of Knowledge Or Memory?

Part I

In a previous article, we started to focus on the examinations used in Bangladesh to test students' English. In today's article, we start an analysis of some of the questions used, because such an analysis will provide further important clues as to why our young students are failing to acquire English successfully.

In the SSC examinations there are two types of questions asked: the non-objective, essay type and the objective, multiple-choice type. We start our analysis with the essay type.

Here is a typical question from an actual SAC paper: 'How is air polluted in big cities and industrial towns?' At first this seems a good topic on an important environmental issue, but how should we go about writing the essay? No length is specified, so we have to know beforehand how long or short the essay should be. The only indication or clue that a short essay is required is provided by the mark (only 5).

So what would happen if you wrote a short, original answer in your own words on the topic? Well, probably you would obtain zero marks, but not because of deficiencies in your English. Your English may in fact be exemplary, but you still haven't given the examiner what they want. For what is actually required is contained in the set textbook, 'English For Today' Book 7, Chapter 3, Section 7, 'Environmental Pollution'. There the relevant information may be found in the final paragraph of the passage entitled 'Air Pollution'. If, as is likely, students cannot cope with the passage because of their poor English, then notebooks are available for them, translating (however

poorly) both the prescribed textbook and the standard SSC questions and answers into Bangla. So actually all that is required to pass the examination is memorisation of these questions and answers.

Naturally these notebooks take the place of the prescribed textbooks for most students because they are weak in English, whilst, ironically, ensuring that such students remain weak. Moreover, a simple analysis of past papers will allow for fairly accurate forecasts of likely SSC questions for any one year, thus narrowing down considerably what has been memorised.

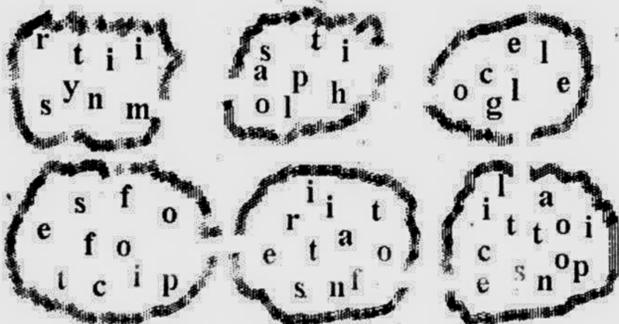
There are two important points here. The first is that students do not have to read the prescribed English textbooks. They do not even have to read all of the notebook. Consequently students do not have to learn what is prescribed in the English syllabus in order to pass the examination, but only a highly selective area. The second is that students are only expected to memorise and repeat. The examination does not indicate whether students understand what they have written, and, therefore, understanding is neither required nor encouraged. Similarly, originality, imagination and creativity are totally excluded.

Although it is true that students will memorise and repeat more efficiently what they have understood, the memorising process tends to discourage, and certainly does not facilitate, understanding, especially when the focus is entirely on doing well in the examination. That is why the headmaster referred to in a previous article decried the growing emphasis on obtaining high marks at the expense of acquiring knowledge.

You may wonder whether the question quoted above is typical of all the SSC essay type questions. Unfortunately it is. In fact the requirement to memorise and repeat is made even more explicit in some questions - 'Write after the text,' the examination paper tells students at one point. Even the longer essays of 'about 200 words,' including letters (both formal and informal) require memorisation and repetition from the prescribed 'Grammar, Translation, and Composition' textbook. So, as far as the essay type questions are concerned, we may conclude that not only do they not test what is actually stipulated in the English language syllabus, but they do not provide any indication of students' abilities in English. They test memory, but neither understanding of, nor skill in, the English language.

Wobbly Words

Try this word puzzle. In each shape the letters are jumbled up. Put them in the correct order. Be careful. There is more than one word in some of them. What do they all have in common?



1. 2. 3. 4.
5. 6.

The Word Processor



Answers: 1. monkey 2. hospital 3. college 4. post office 5. fire station 6. police station - They are all public buildings.

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