



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 24, 2011

Give Thanks — and Act Thankfully

But for some reason, my friend asked if I remembered Thanksgiving Day that year, 1963. I said the one thing I remembered on that Thanksgiving, the Thursday after the Friday assassination, was my aunt saying she had heard someone at work say we had nothing to be thankful for that Thanksgiving. I recall my aunt saying, rightly, that we still had much to be thankful for, the death of the President notwithstanding. For one thing, one President was dead and another had taken his place with no further bloodshed. No coup, no putsch, no riots, no soldiers in the street. Just President Johnson casting a pall of moral grayness over the landscape: "Let us continue."



But continue toward what? Within hours of Kennedy's assassination we had become a nation transformed, having been a people rather evenly divided about our President a mere thousand days after he had won — with the help of the posthumous vote in Illinois and elsewhere — one of the closest elections in history, to a nation united in the belief that the slain hero was well worthy of canonization and a place of honor on the church as well as the state calendar. It was as though the Kennedy administration really had been Camelot and we its grateful subjects. Gone was the remembrance of a shaky stock market and the joke about the Kennedy cocktail: "stocks on the rocks." Long forgotten was the bitter fight with U.S. Steel and the President's angry remembrance that his father had warned him steel executives were "sons of b***hes." Nearly forgotten, too, was the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the bitter joke that the President's daughter, Caroline, then three years old, was a nice kid, but should not be allowed to plan another invasion of Cuba.

The young President's first meeting with the wily old Communist in the Kremlin, Nikita Khrushchev, and Kennedy coming away shaken and unnerved, was also forgotten. The buildup of U.S. forces in Vietnam had hardly been noticed. The deal that ended the Cuban missile crisis, our withdrawal of missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of missiles from Cuba, was still secret. That the Soviets had been able to construct a wall dividing the city of Berlin and get away with it was a sore point benumbed by the shock of assassination. "Let us continue," the new President said. Toward what end, we hardly knew.

Nearly half a century later, we see what that continuation meant in terms of foreign and domestic policies and consequences. Lyndon Johnson was overwhelmingly elected the following November with huge Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. We had the biggest blizzard of new legislation since the New Deal. The Great Society was a "legislate now, pay later" phenomenon, with the biggest expenditures coming in the "out" years, as the programs and constituents grew. Our interventionist foreign policy also grew to the point where today's reigning superpower is overextended all around the globe. We no longer fear permanent and entangling alliances warned of by Washington and Jefferson.



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Where we once quarreled over deficits of a few billion annually, we now go blithely along with yearly deficits of more than \$1 trillion.

We no longer say, "Let us continue." Three years ago it was "hope and change." Not much has changed, but we still must hope. Let us hope that we and our countrymen may yet awaken to the fact that America's wounds are mostly self-inflicted and the nation's death from those wounds will be a suicide, whether or not there is a coroner's report and a blue-ribbon commission to say it was the work of external enemies jealous of our liberty and prosperity.

We have, perhaps, forgotten how to be thankful. We might be thankful we are not living in one of the many countries being regularly bombed and/or invaded by the United States. Our government "liberated" Iraq from things like electricity, safe and reliable transportation, and potable water — not to mention religious freedom. We installed traffic lights which were of no help since there was no electricity. We left a vacuum of law and order, and chaos reigned supreme. We made a shambles of international law and gave Iraq one hell of an illegal immigration problem.

We may be thankful this Thanksgiving Day that no foreign power threatens us militarily and our blessings are so bountiful that for all our problems, millions of "huddled masses, yearning to breathe free" still want to come here. We may be thankful that when an overbearing President, caught up in imperial hubris, leads a chant of "Yes, we can," we are still free to rise up and counter with a chant of "No, you can't!" It would be better still if the dormant Congress would exercise that freedom of speech, as well as its power of the purse.

We no longer have the cheerful, optimistic President Reagan quoting Thomas Paine's hubristic claim, "We have it in our power to begin the world again." No, we don't. We have a government that makes us wonder at times if it was really a good idea to begin the world the first time. But God wouldn't take the advice of dissenting angels who warned of human treachery and so here we are, secure in the knowledge that when the meek inherit the earth they will be unable to pay the inheritance taxes and the interest on the national debt.

But we still have our God, our nation, our families and friends, and lots of wonderful memories. In spite of it all, LBJ had a point. Separating the wheat from the chaff, the bad from the good, "Let us continue." With grateful hearts, let us, as President Kennedy said, "go forth to lead the land we love, knowing that in this world, God's work must truly be our own."



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