

Kennedy and Dominica – 50 years on
By Gabriel J. Christian, Esq. –
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US President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963

Today, Dominica's government has its administrative headquarters on Kennedy Avenue. The national financial center is also on Kennedy Avenue – a major artery in the small national capital of the island nation which travels east from the Dame Eugenia Charles Boulevard to its end at the front gate of the newly built Windsor Park stadium. Kennedy Avenue was called New Street until 1964, when it was renamed in honor of US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK).

On November 22, 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Lee Harvey Oswald, an employee of the School Book Depository overlooking the route taken by the President's limousine, was arrested that day. Oswald was charged with the death of a police officer Tippett and President Kennedy. However – before there could be a trial – Oswald was shot dead in the Dallas police station on November 24, 1963 by Dallas night club owner Jack Ruby. Despite much controversy attendant to the event, and many conspiracy theories, the overwhelming evidence is that Oswald shot and killed President Kennedy.

Dominicans had followed the rise of the young President and his charming wife, Jacqueline, with great interest. He had been the first Roman Catholic to become a US president, and that meant much on Dominica where the Catholic Church towered over all others. Kennedy had also been seen as sympathetic to the African American quest for freedom and civil rights. After Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the now famous "I Have a Dream Speech" at the March on Washington in August 1963, Kennedy welcomed him and fellow march leaders to the White House in a show of support. In a majority African descended country, such a disposition consolidated a positive image of Kennedy in the public mind.

In 1961 Kennedy had created the Alliance for Progress, an anti-poverty program to curb Soviet and Cuban influence in the region, after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Food aid from that program – much of it via the

Catholic Church – came in the form of powdered milk called “Klim” which was distributed around the island. A fat product called “Buttermilk” was also distributed in a silver colored gallon can. Both Klim and Buttermilk were ubiquitous in the Roseau that I grew up in during the 1960s. In the words of retired civil servant Alberta Christian, “All schools got a batch of food; pregnant women got the food aid at the clinics, the Klim was also distributed at schools. Cheese, flour and rice were also distributed. Often times, you would see people carrying water in the empty silver cans. Kennedy was well liked by ordinary Dominicans, as he was the first US President Dominicans associated with such assistance. I was washing clothes in a tub when the word came of the President’s death and people in Pottersville were quite sad, some even crying. It was that popular sentiment which led to the change of name from New Street to Kennedy Avenue.”

Kennedy was human and despite recent revelations, his legacy not only endures, but continues to grow. JFK organized the US Peace Corp Volunteer program. Dominica became one of the first countries to receive the volunteers. One such volunteer, Robert “Bob” MaGuire became a national sensation when he became the first foreigner to enter the national calypso show. He later authored the popular folk song Dominica, which can be heard on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npCH9UTLGI&feature=player_embedded#t=0.

When the President was brutally cut down that day in Dallas, Dominicans were shocked and went into mourning. Ex-serviceman Wendell Christian, a committed diarist, who was then Station Officer at Melville Hall Airport fire station, noted: Friday, November 22, Kennedy assassinated; the death shocked the world; November 23, wept for Mr. Kennedy; Monday, November 25, weather very fair; President Kennedy who was assassinated was laid to rest.” Thereafter, many Dominicans, hung portraits in honor of the slain President Kennedy in their homes; some even named their children after him.

It is of note that Kennedy’s aide, Pulitzer-prize winning historian Arthur Schlesinger had paid a visit to the island in 1957, along with Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson later became US United Nations Ambassador during the Kennedy administration. Fifty years on, the US presence on Dominica is still marked by Ross University, ex-pats who relocated to the island, missionaries and Peace Corp Volunteers who give of their time. Today, the Peace Corp is headed locally by Dominican-born Patrick Henderson. It would be fair to say

that because of President Kennedy, the United States has since been seen as a more welcoming destination for Dominicans to visit, study, work