

50 YEARS ON

JFK death: media reaction in a pre-Twitter world

By Thomas Stephens



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A torchlight procession through Bern in honour of John F Kennedy on November 25, 1963

(RDB)

Fifty years after the murder of United States President John F Kennedy, swissinfo.ch looks back at how Swiss media covered the event – and to what extent their coverage was influenced by the two countries' relationship.

“Like wildfire, the terrible news – simply unbelievable – spread on Friday evening, also through Basel,” wrote the Basler Nachrichten, which in 1977 became the Basler Zeitung.

“Hundreds of people went into town in search of reliable news, forming crowds in front of shops with televisions in the windows. Newspaper editors were bombarded with phone calls, and early on Saturday morning the weekend papers with the first reliable reports were grabbed from vendors' hands.”

Rarely had the Swiss public been shaken by the death of a foreign head of state to such a degree, it continued. “With surprising spontaneity, flags everywhere in the city, in private homes and gardens, were flown at half-mast.”

Kennedy was shot at 12.30pm (6.30pm Swiss time) on Friday, November 22 (see box). This meant almost all Swiss newspapers had to wait until the following morning to go to press, letting the whirlwind of conflicting reports and speculation settle somewhat.

One of the few papers to print evening editions in those days was the Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ), which led its 10pm edition on November 22 with the latest information from news agencies Reuters, AFP and UPI: Kennedy had been hit by three shots, he was dead and the identity of the shooter was not known “but police are looking for a roughly 30-year-old suspect”.

It also quoted the New York correspondent of the Russian news agency TASS, who said the attack had been committed by “rightwing extremists”.

Kennedy assassination

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was assassinated at 12.30pm (6.30pm Swiss time) on Friday, November 22, 1963, in Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas. He was 46.

Kennedy was shot while travelling in a presidential motorcade with his wife Jacqueline, Texas Governor John Connally and Connally's wife Nellie. Kennedy was pronounced dead at 1pm.

A ten-month investigation in 1963-64 by the Warren Commission concluded that Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, and that Jack Ruby also acted alone when he killed Oswald before he could stand trial. Although the Commission's conclusions were initially supported by a majority of the American public, polls conducted between 1966 and 2003 found that as many as 80% of Americans have suspected that there was a plot or cover-up.

In contrast to the conclusions of the Warren Commission, the US House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978 that Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy.

To date, there is no consensus on who may have been involved in such a conspiracy. Those often mentioned include Ruby, organised crime (the Mafia), the CIA, the FBI, the Secret Service, the KGB, rightwing groups or rightwing individuals, President Lyndon Johnson, pro- or anti-Castro Cubans, the military and/or industrial groups allied with the military.

'Much admired'

"One still can't believe the news that Kennedy has been assassinated," the NZZ wrote. "The life of a statesman who rose in an unparalleled manner to his country's top office has been interrupted just when it was starting to have an effect."

It suddenly became clear, the NZZ continued effusively, to what extent Kennedy had taken hold of people's hearts and minds.

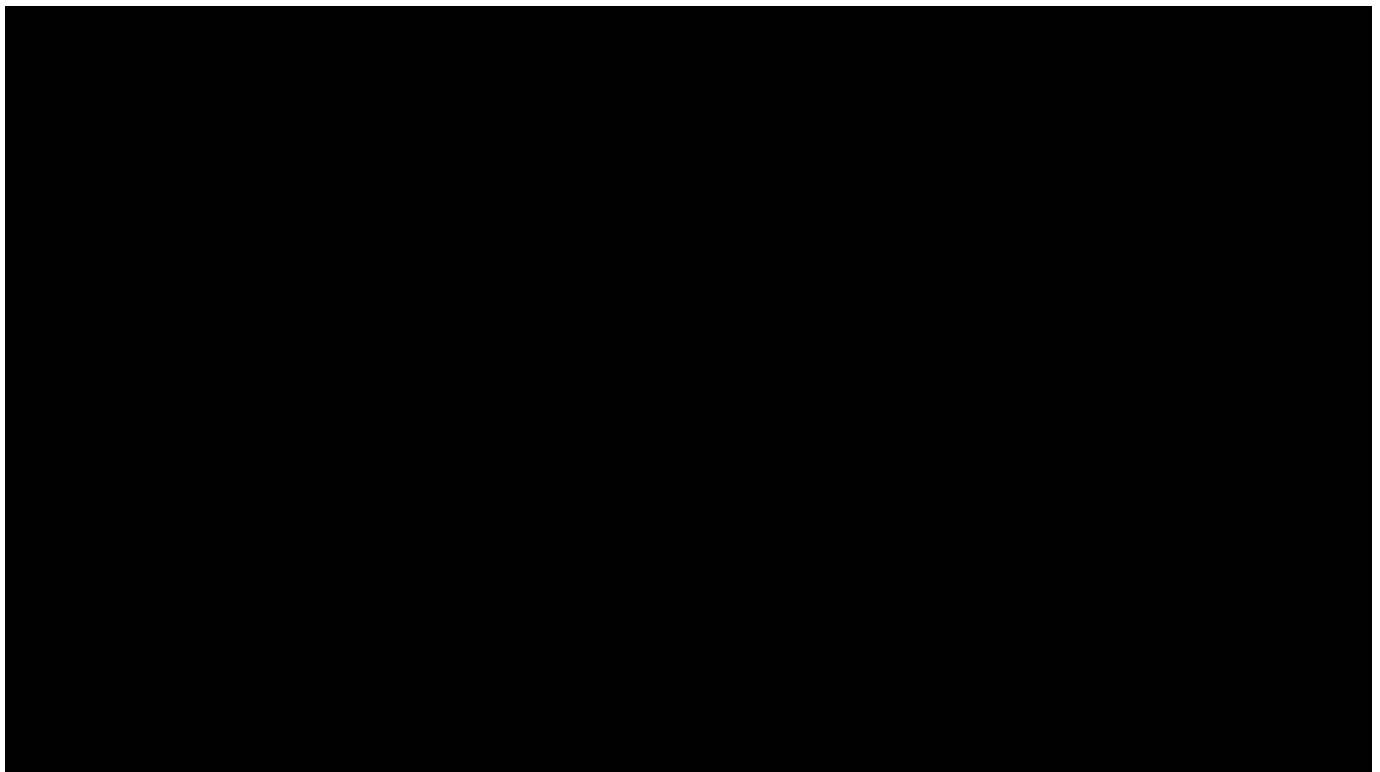
"His background, his wartime heroics, his 1960 election campaign in which with boundless energy and cunning he won over colleagues and defeated opponents, the new style he brought to the White House, his youth, the lack of prejudice with which he

selected colleagues, the image of his wife and children, his charm mixed with toughness, all this contributed to the fact that everyone – friend or foe, American or not – had to share the fate of this president.”

In the bottom corner of its front page, the NZZ also printed a telegram from Swiss President Willy Spühler to Vice-President Lyndon B Johnson, in which the Swiss cabinet acknowledged the death of “the much admired departed, snatched far too early from his loved ones” and offered its deepest sympathy.

The paper reported that the Swiss foreign minister had paid a visit of condolence to the US embassy in Bern on Saturday and that in the Swiss capital, flags on embassies and many public buildings were flown at half-mast. Switzerland had represented US interests in Cuba since January 1961.

Although Kennedy never made it to Switzerland as president – the nearest he got was Frankfurt in June 1963 (the same trip during which he made his “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech) – his death was felt across the country and across all ages:



PAYING TRIBUTE

Swiss mourn the death of a president

<http://www.srf/rtss.ch/swissinfo.ch>

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‘Unimaginable burden’

In the tabloid *Blick*, which had been launched five years earlier, co-editor Claus Wilhelm wrote a personal half-page editorial on the death of the man “on whom the hopes of the world lay”.

“Hundreds of millions of hearts are numb with shock and grief. Kennedy is dead. The West has suddenly been robbed of its greatest leader. Kennedy is dead. The man who repelled Soviet missiles from Cuba is dead.”

Wilhelm described the first of two times he saw Kennedy, standing three metres away at an airport in Vienna in 1961. “I looked right into his steel grey eyes. This young man radiated only one thing: responsibility.”

As for the future, Wilhelm said the only thing known for sure was that the “unimaginable burden” of the presidency would now fall on the “broad Texan shoulders” of Lyndon B Johnson.

“Johnson is an old fox. A professional politician. But president? It’s hard to imagine.”

Historical perspective

The *Tribune de Genève* said that the cabinet, in deciding to send the foreign minister to the funeral service in Washington, “had felt that the reaction of sadness among the public was quite exceptional and it concluded correctly that our country wanted to be associated in a certain manner at the tribute afforded to Kennedy”.

Normally, it pointed out, cabinet ministers didn’t travel to such events, “a precaution to keep Switzerland at a distance from the swirl of global politics”.

It was the first time that such a high-ranking Swiss had represented Switzerland at a funeral – “this is only possible, and desired by the Swiss public, because the man in front of whose remains one bows embodies an ideal of peace, and this fact is obvious even to those countries with a different political ideology”.



JFK ASSASSINATION

‘I walked home, stunned and disoriented’

By Thomas Stephens

John F Kennedy was a symbol of hope, not to mention “youth, dynamism and cultural glamour”, a Swiss-American political scientist ...

Politics

The Tribune de Genève concluded with some historical perspective. “The funeral of Kennedy, like that of Edward VII [British king who died in 1910], is without doubt one of the events that will go down in history. Were Switzerland not present, one would have to explain its absence. It’s a lot better that we are there, in the form of [Foreign Minister] Wahlen, because the sadness in Switzerland is sincere.”

‘Senseless crime’

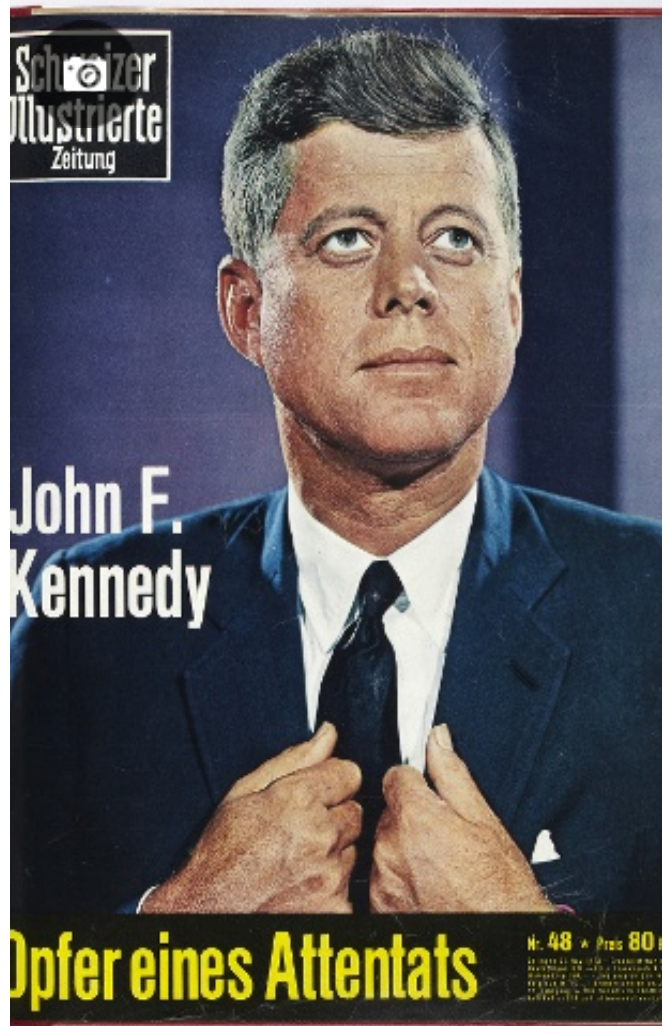
For the Tages-Anzeiger in Zurich, Kennedy was the victim of a “treacherous murder” and a “senseless crime”.

“Like an outraged cry, the bad news spread on Friday evening. Why this assassination? To what purpose? There is no answer. This crime is senseless. Shaken, scandalised and confused, people all around the world are mourning with Americans, who have lost their young head of state,” it wrote in a front-page editorial on the Saturday.

“Whoever the murderer was, and whatever his motive – whether he turns out to be a racist fanatic [Kennedy supported racial integration and civil rights] or a follower of Fidel Castro [the Cuban Missile Crisis had taken place just over a year earlier], with this atrocity he has done no one a service.”

The paper judged it too early to weigh up the political consequences. “Heads and hearts are still too shattered by yesterday’s tragedy. The extent of the sympathy reflects how much Kennedy meant to his compatriots and countless millions beyond US borders,” it wrote.

“For many who mourn him today, he embodied with his youth, way of thinking and plans a glimmer of hope for a better future. His death casts a gloomy shadow over these expectations.”



JFK REACTION

Hold the front page!

The murder of John F Kennedy 50 years ago presented newspapers around the world with a massive breaking news story with few solid facts. How would ...

Politics

What if?

In a piece of creative writing worthy of Aldous Huxley and CS Lewis, who both died on the same day as Kennedy, the Gazzetta Ticinese asked in an eye-catching front-page headline on November 28: "What would be the consequences had it been De Gaulle?" It was in fact quoting self-absorbed French coverage.

Going to press five days after the event, the American Swiss Gazette, published weekly in New York from 1868 to 1973, relegated Kennedy's assassination to a few inches near the bottom of the front page, without any pictures.

The main headline: "The position of Switzerland in the European integration conflict." Plus ça change...

1963 in Switzerland

Population: 5,700,000 (2012: 8,000,000). Average life expectancy: 70.3 years for men; 75.2 years for women (2012: 80.5/84.7).

January: Lake Zurich freezes over. It did so only one other time in the 20th century, in 1929.

February 17: the first television programme in Romansh is broadcast (regular Swiss transmissions in German had started in 1953, French in 1954 and Italian in 1958).

March: all hotels in Zermatt are closed after an outbreak of typhoid. Four people die and 400 cases are diagnosed. Some British papers describe Switzerland as "underdeveloped regarding hygiene".

April 29: an agreement is signed by Switzerland, Germany, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands to clean up the Rhine. Pollution in Lake Geneva (not connected to the Rhine) results in a swimming ban on several Swiss beaches.

May 6: Switzerland joins the Council of Europe.

May 26: in the first of three national referendums, 62% of voters reject an initiative calling for the public to have a say in the acquisition of nuclear weapons. The second and third votes are held on December 8 on continuing with the government's financial

plans and on scholarships/educational allowances. Both are comfortably approved.

June 20: The Moscow-Washington hotline is authorised in Geneva by representatives of the Soviet Union and the United States. Depicted in fiction as a red telephone, the hotline actually consisted of one teleprinter each in both nations.

June 22: Switzerland's first mosque is opened, in Zurich.

September 4: Switzerland's first aeroplane catastrophe: Swissair Flight SR306 from Zurich to Rome via Geneva crashes near Dürrenäsch, canton Aargau, shortly after take-off, killing all 80 people on board.

By Thomas Stephens, swissinfo.ch

Links

[Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland - Kennedy dossier](#)