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The Once and Future King: Robert F. Kennedy as a Liberal Icon

Anne Mørk

Abstract

This article examines Robert F. Kennedy's status as an icon to the American public and both liberals and conservatives. The difficulty in categorizing Kennedy's complex political beliefs within just one of many liberal traditions is key to understanding his popularity with various—and often opposing—groups within American politics. Whereas conservatives favor Kennedy's tough attitude on law-and-order, liberals admire Kennedy's electoral appeal and ability to unite voters. However, the American people have adopted Kennedy as a non-partisan icon in the tradition of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy. Starting with Kennedy's death, the American people remembered him as a martyr of American democracy, justice, and equality. In the new millennium, Kennedy has frequently been presented in the media and political rhetoric as tough, but compassionate, and thereby as a liberal icon for the ages.

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