

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Where were you?



The author in the early 1960s

I was 24 years old in 1960 when U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy ran for president and it was my first presidential election. We couldn't vote until age 21 in those days, until legislators finally figured out that if young people were eligible for military service at eighteen years of age, they certainly ought to be able to vote.

I came from a family that was politically active and passionate Democrats. President Dwight Eisenhower and his wife Mamie were the last of what we considered old men with rather dowdy wives and Senator John and Jackie Kennedy were young and glamorous. I was working at Illinois Bell Telephone Company in the Chicago Loop and was surrounded by Democrats while I was at work. There were 40 women service representatives, three supervisors and two managers in our business office at 212 W. Washington St. Most of the women were Democrats, the supervisors played it safe and didn't take a stand, and the two male managers were Republicans. Surprise, surprise.

In that office I generated a lot of interest and excitement over the election and of course everyone knew I was a Kennedy enthusiast. One of my Catholic friends in the office told her parents that she actually knew a Lutheran who was going to vote for a Catholic for president. I don't think they believed her.

Back home in Oak Park, however, social life revolved around good friends in our Norwegian Lutheran church and they were solid Republicans. Even my first husband was a Republican and voted for Nixon. I was teased a lot, but tolerated as a "token Democrat." With my being the only one expressing such sentiments, I wasn't much of a threat.

We really had a lot of fun in the office during that election season. One day my female supervisor, whom I admired very much, slipped over to my desk and whispered to me that the John Kennedy motorcade would be passing the telephone company building in about five minutes and I had permission to go down to the street to watch. I wasn't to tell anyone where I was going or why. I was the only person in the office told about it.

The management was very tolerant of our conversation, but another time I was on

the telephone, (which we were all day) and being observed by a vice-president of the company. He was sitting at my side when an employee from another department walked up to my desk and dumped on it a large supply of Kennedy bumper stickers and pins. I think the vice-president and I were both stunned and it's a wonder I didn't get fired. I quickly cleared my desk and apologized and the other employee traipsed off without knowing the situation he had created.

Except for my brother and me, all Republicans attended our election night party in Oak Park. The night was a real cliffhanger. We didn't know until the next day who had won. Of course, I got the last laugh and my friends found out that in spite of their political leanings, I was in the majority after all.

Yes, I remember the day Kennedy was assassinated and 40 years later I feel the same emotions of heartbreak and shock when I see television clips of the day. I was watching the soap opera "As the World Turns," which was on from 12:30 to 1:00 p.m. and it was interrupted by newsman Walter Cronkite. We've all seen clips of his trying to control his emotions during those announcements.

I was alone in our apartment and called my brother, who was attending the University of Chicago. The next week was a horrible series of days of viewing on television the events of that day and the following ceremonies, plus the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald. It was terrible week and I didn't take my eyes off the television set. I can remember being enraged and hurt that some people who were not Kennedy supporters didn't seem to be very upset about the assassination.

As opposed as I am to President Bush's handling of our foreign and domestic policy, I would react with the same sorrow if such a tragedy would happen to him, his family and our country. Politics is important, but surely there are more important emotions and experiences that we should all share as human beings.

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