



“My Two Cents’ Worth”



by Ed Reiter

WHY NOT A JFK COMMEMORATIVE?

This year marks a major anniversary for one of the most shocking events in U.S. history. It was 50 years ago, on Nov. 22, 1963, that President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed while riding in a motorcade in Dallas.

Within a matter of weeks, JFK’s assassination led to the creation of the Kennedy half dollar, which entered circulation in March 1964. That coin—though wildly popular—never saw wide use and has been on life support

for the last decade, struck exclusively for use in proof sets and other collector’s items sold by the U.S. Mint at premium prices.

It has long been my belief that Uncle Sam erred by making the JFK half dollar part of the nation’s regular coinage lineup, rather than a one-time-only commemorative. That’s easy to say in retrospect, of course, now that it’s apparent the decision ended up killing the 50-cent piece as a useful piece of money in daily commerce.

True, the Mint wasn’t making commemorative coins at the time. But Congress had no problem scrapping the Franklin half dollar after only 16 years—well below the statutory minimum of 25 years. So twisting laws and policies clearly wasn’t viewed as a concern.

It occurs to me that a one-time commemorative, perhaps a silver dollar, would be just as good an idea in 2013—not only as a way to channel the nation’s lingering grief, but also as a way to bring a fitting end to the long series of coins spawned by that grief five decades ago. What I propose is a special one-year coin bearing a new design to mark the somber anniversary—with the now-irrelevant Kennedy halves to be removed completely from production starting next year.

As matters stand, the halves have become Non-Circulating Legal-Tender (NCLT) coins—money in name only—and the Mint’s main reason for making them seems to be the added marketability they bring to proof and “mint” sets, thereby enhancing the profit the government pockets from selling these sets at substantial markups.

This is hardly the scenario envisioned by those who pressed for a Kennedy coin back in 1963. Then again, the chain



1964 Kennedy half dollar

of events that followed the coin’s initial release could—and perhaps *should*—have been anticipated.

Demand for the new half dollar—not just in this country but around the world—was so massive that the Mint couldn’t sustain it in circulation, despite producing more than 433 million examples in 1964, still the all-time high for any half dollar during a single calendar year. People saw the coin as an official but inexpensive tribute to the slain young president—one with

a large, handsome likeness of JFK. As a result, they saved it as a memento, rather than spending it as money.

The very next year, silver was removed from the quarter and dime and reduced to 40 percent in the half dollar. That gave people a second big reason for saving Kennedy halves dated 1964—for they contained the traditional 90-percent-silver composition. But it also led to hoarding of all older halves. And that, combined with the sentiment-driven saving of Kennedy halves, drastically reduced the number of 50-cent pieces actually being used in U.S. commerce.

Americans quickly adjusted by using two quarters instead of a single half dollar, and after that the larger coin—an integral part of the nation’s money supply since 1794—fell into almost total disuse. Production of halves for commerce continued through the start of the new millennium, but they never bounced back, even though far fewer were being saved as Kennedy mementos and they lost all silver content in 1971, removing that incentive for saving them as well.

It came as no surprise when the Mint halted regular production of Kennedy half dollars starting in 2002 after decades of subsidence-level mintages. What did raise some eyebrows was the Mint’s decision to keep making halves for collector sets, mini-bags and other “numismatic” offerings. To critics, this cheapened a coin that came into being amid deep national anguish that prompted a heartfelt quest for a worthy tribute.

Would a one-time commemorative fill that bill? I think it would. It would certainly be more meaningful than a coin intended just to fill a hole in a government proof set. ☺