



IN THE SHADOWS:
JFK IN A PRIVATE
MOMENT

Pool Parties in Camelot?

A muckraking book on the Kennedy myth offers titillating details—but has problems of its own

By EVAN THOMAS

AFTER A TOUGH MORNING IN THE Oval Office, John F. Kennedy liked to take a dip in the White House pool. The purpose, according to early hagiographers, was to soothe the president's aching back. According to investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, however, Kennedy was taking care of other needs. As the Secret Service stood guard outside, the president routinely skinny-dipped with two of his favorite female assistants, nicknamed Fiddle and Faddle. One day, warned that Jackie was on her way to the pool for an unexpected swim, the president and his

fellow frolickers scrambled for cover. "You could see one big pair of footprints and two smaller pair of wet footprints leading to the Oval Office," a Secret Service man told Hersh.

Hersh has amassed a wealth of such titillating details for his new book, "The Dark Side of Camelot" (498 pages. Little, Brown. \$26.95). Unfortunately, many of the juicier stories aren't exactly new. The scene of Jackie unexpectedly returning to the White House while Kennedy was splashing around with naked ladies was first reported more than 20 years ago in a book called "Dog Days at the White House," by Traphes Bryant, who was a dog handler for

the First Family. Fiddle and Faddle made their public debut in the press at the time of some congressional hearings on the abuse of executive power in 1975.

For years Hersh has been claiming to reporters that he was going to expose the darkest secrets of the Kennedy family. This was a formidable task, given that revisionists have been busily debunking Kennedys for at least two decades. It would take a truly astounding scoop at this point to surprise historians, much less shock ordinary moviegoers who learn their history from Oliver Stone. For a time, it seemed that Hersh had found the smoking gun—a cache of papers tying Kennedy to the mob and a scheme to pay off Marilyn Monroe. But in an embarrassing disclosure last September, Hersh acknowledged that the papers were almost surely forgeries. The admission set off a round of unflattering profiles of Hersh that put an even greater burden on him to deliver a bona fide blockbuster.

While fun to read, Hersh's book is something of an anticlimax. It strongly argues that Kennedy's private sins put his presidency at risk—but that is hardly a new idea. What's still missing is the kind of solid proof that would rewrite history. To be sure, Hersh, a dogged and resourceful reporter, has mined the Kennedy drama and turned up a wide array of interesting bit players who have provocative tales to tell. Whether some of them can be believed, however, is a real question. Whether these

sou
que
rev
gra
196
wa
wh
stru
ven
of
exc
mat
ent
mag
F
Sec
as
incl
tute
sex
the
call
was
the
Nov
she
wit
and
ing
suit
the
Dav
ush
of
t
ma
tim
"W
Thi

ten
prc
tin
Ke
flic
we
bla
the
Ell
hoc
Ke
bei
nar
her
(
frie
by
Ke
bel
at
the

sources are saying anything new is another question. On page 12, for instance, Hersh reveals that Kennedy tore a groin muscle grabbing at a girl by the pool in September 1963. Forced to wear a full-body brace, he was held erect, unable to bend forward, when Lee Harvey Oswald's first bullet struck him in the neck in Dallas that November. The second shot blew off the back of Kennedy's head. A gruesome shocker—except we learn on page 439 that the information first appeared, with slightly different facts, in a Hugh Sidey column in *Time* magazine in 1987.

Hersh's most credible new sources are Secret Service men who stood by, appalled, as a steady stream of women, including high-priced prostitutes, were brought in to have sex with the president. One of the agents, Larry Newman, recalled his "baptism by fire." He was guarding the president at the Olympic Hotel in Seattle in November 1961 when a local sheriff came out of the elevator with two "high-class call girls" and proclaimed that he was taking them to the presidential suite. Newman tried to stop them, but presidential aide Dave Powers intervened to usher the hookers right in. One of the local cops asked Newman, "Does this go on all the time?" Newman's answer: "Well, we travel during the day. This only happens at night."

NEWMAN, WHO WILL repeat his story on an ABC News special expected to air later this month, told Hersh, "We often joked that we couldn't even protect the president from getting venereal disease." (In fact, Kennedy was continually afflicted with VD.) The agents were rightly worried about blackmail, too. Hersh relates the story (again, oft told) of Ellen Rometsch, an elegant hooker who slept with Kennedy—and whom the FBI suspected of being an East German spy. The Kennedys narrowly avoided a huge scandal by having her deported and, Hersh reports, paid off.

One of Kennedy's most infamous girlfriends put him at risk of being blackmailed by the Mafia. The basic facts were exposed by a congressional investigation in 1975: Kennedy shared a girlfriend, Judith Campbell Exner, with Mafia don Sam Giancana at a time when Giancana was working with the CIA in a failed plot to kill Cuba's Fidel

Castro. The incredible coincidence has been catnip to conspiracy theorists ever since. It has been speculated—but never proved—that the ties between Kennedy and the mob were much stronger, and that the Mafia had a hand in Kennedy's death.

Hersh claims to have "indisputable evidence" that Giancana used mob muscle to win the 1960 election for Kennedy. His sources include a mob lawyer who allegedly helped set up a summit meeting between Giancana and Joseph Kennedy, JFK's father, in 1960; Tina Sinatra, who says her father Frank acted as a go-between for the Kennedys and Giancana, and a former FBI agent who says that the mobster was over-

Hersh's most controversial charge is that Exner acted as a courier between the president and the don, carrying satchels of cash and secret communications. Again, the story is not new; Exner has been making this claim for many years. Kitty Kelley first reported it in a *People* magazine article (also entitled "The Dark Side of Camelot") in 1988. Exner is far from the most reliable source. She has changed her story many times: she says she was afraid of a mob hit. Hersh offers two new witnesses to back her up. One is a Hollywood promoter named Johnny Grant, who says that Exner told him back in 1963 that she had acted as a courier between Giancana

and JFK. (Hersh does not mention that Grant later became an active supporter of Richard Nixon.) Another is a Chicago political operative named Martin Underwood, who told Hersh that he had been dispatched by Kennedy campaign aide Kenny O'Donnell to "keep an eye on Exner" as she took the train from Washington to Chicago after a tryst with Kennedy in April 1960. Underwood told Hersh that he watched as Exner "gave the satchel to the waiting Sam Giancana."

It would make a great movie scene. But would JFK really have used a none-too-bright girlfriend to handle something so incredibly sensitive as passing bribes to the Mafia? Surely Father Joe taught his sons a few tricks about keeping secrets. Using emotionally fragile lovers as bagmen could not have been one of them. It also stretches credulity to suggest that Giancana, the all-powerful don, would have been waiting around on a station platform in Chicago to meet the train.

Hersh does push into some dark corners in more convincing, or at least intriguing, ways. He has interviewed an FBI agent who allegedly witnessed two men breaking into Judith

Exner's apartment in August 1962. The two men were the sons of the head of security at General Dynamics. The FBI believed that the men were trying to plant a bug in Exner's home, presumably to listen in on her private conversations. As it turned out, General Dynamics, a defense contractor in deep financial trouble, was desperately bidding for a lucrative contract to build a new fighter, the TFX. Although many experts believed that Boeing would build a better airplane, the Kennedy



THE AUTHOR: HERSH IS NOW EMBROILED IN CONTROVERSY

heard by government bugs boasting about his ties to Kennedy. All possible—but Hersh never stops to ask why the Kennedys needed Giancana to fix the Chicago election when they had Mayor Richard Daley's machine to stuff the ballot box. Hersh also neglects to ask why, if Giancana held such a big I.O.U. from the Kennedy family, Bobby Kennedy's Justice Department so vigorously investigated Giancana (G-men even tailed the mobster onto the golf course).

administration awarded General Dynamics the contract in November 1962. Did General Dynamics blackmail Kennedy by threatening to reveal his affair with Exner? Despite five years of digging, Hersh cannot provide an answer—but the story was worth pursuing.

Similarly, Hersh is right to examine the Kennedys' role in the assassination plots against Fidel Castro. It seems likely that the Kennedys ordered the CIA to "eliminate" the Cuban leader. Less clear is whether the president knew that the CIA had hired Sam Giancana to try to do the job. Hersh simply asserts the Kennedys' ties to the mob, but the evidence remains murky. The question is very important to Hersh's central thesis that JFK's private life undermined his public performance.

civilians at My Lai. But Hersh has been struggling in recent years to catch up with his old rival, Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward, who has grown rich with a series of "inside" Washington books. (NEWSWEEK is owned by The Washington Post Co.) Hersh is not in it so much for the money as he is for the glory and the thrill of the big score. "It's just exciting," he says. Because of his experience as a young reporter during the Vietnam War, he is righteous about holding power accountable and zealous in his pursuit of truth. "I'm a Vietnam groupie," he told NEWSWEEK. "I don't tolerate official lying."

Lately, however, his zeal seems to have occasionally consumed him. A case in point is Hersh's account of a financial scandal that appeared to be simmering in the

mittee aide who worshiped the Kennedys, was also a pathological liar who was out to ruin Kenny O'Donnell any way he could (O'Donnell frequently tried to get Corbin ejected from the Kennedy circle). During his reporting, Hersh was repeatedly warned by Kennedy alumni that Corbin was a con man with an anti-O'Donnell ax to grind. Jerry Bruno, a Kennedy advance man, says that Hersh replied, "It doesn't matter if any of this is true. It's a story that needs to be told." Hersh responded to NEWSWEEK: "That's preposterous. I was on notice that Corbin needed to be checked out, but he wasn't lying about this."

Hersh has boxes of documents that, he says, detail financial improprieties by the Kennedys, and he may one day break the big story. But his current book relies more on human sources, and that can be problematic. Hersh revives an old tale that Kennedy was married to Palm Beach socialite Durie Malcolm in 1947. The alleged marriage was a lark—a quickie at the justice of the peace—but according to Hersh, the happy couple never bothered to get a divorce. Instead, Hersh writes, an old Kennedy friend named Charles Spalding teamed up with a local Palm Beach lawyer to simply remove the marriage records from the courthouse. Hersh acknowledges that his source—Spalding—is 79 years old and suffering from short-term-memory loss.

Hersh is forced to rely on such sources—and their frail memories—because there is often no paper trail. JFK's minions have apparently deep-sixed at least some of Kennedy's tapes, as well as boxloads of documents. Writing about the mob has always vexed serious scholars. As historian Michael Beschloss points out, "There is no Sam

Giancana presidential library." As a result, the Kennedy legend will likely remain just that, shrouded in mystery. Interestingly, Hersh chose not to believe the most persistent of all Kennedy myths, that the president was killed as the result of a plot. Though Hersh originally set out to write his book about the Kennedy assassination, he shifted the focus after dismissing conspiracy theories about JFK's death. It is too bad he did not maintain the same level of skeptical detachment when weighing stories about Kennedy's life.

THOMAS, an assistant managing editor, is at work on a biography of Robert Kennedy.



BEHIND THE MASK: THE KENNEDYS ALLEGEDLY HAD TIES TO MOBSTERS LIKE GIANCANA (FAR LEFT, WITH PHYLLIS MCGUIRE), WITH WHOM JFK SHARED A MISTRESS, JUDITH EXNER (LEFT)

Hersh should have acknowledged the gauziness of his proof.

Still, Hersh's book is skillfully packaged and more coherently written than some of his earlier works, which suffered from the investigative reporter's love of extraneous and confusing detail. But the packaging is perhaps a little too clever. It covers up weaknesses in reporting that will not be obvious to the average reader, but which historians are sure to pounce on as the book is reviewed in the weeks ahead.

Hersh is an extraordinarily hardworking reporter, a hero to a whole generation of journalists who remember his 1969 exposé of the U.S. Army massacre of Vietnamese

White House on the eve of JFK's assassination. Hersh reports that Charles Bartlett, a newspaper columnist and an old JFK crony, wrote the president in the summer of 1963 that "an aura of scandal" was building around the White House. Bartlett passed along charges that a top aide—O'Donnell—was skimming campaign contributions for his own personal wealth. Bartlett's source—the man making the allegations—was a longtime Kennedy political operative named Paul Corbin.

As Hersh notes, Corbin was a colorful figure, "conspiratorial and full of swagger." But what Hersh fails to tell the reader is that Corbin, a Democratic National Com-