



## ONE HISTORIAN'S VIEW: **SHODDY WORK**

Columbia's Alan Brinkley says Hersh's history is not new, and his fresh allegations are poorly sourced

**E**FFORTS TO EXPOSE WHAT SEYMOUR Hersh calls the dark side of Camelot began even before the idea of an American Camelot was born. On the day John Kennedy died, the best-selling nonfiction book in the U.S. was, as it had been for several months, Victor Lasky's *J.F.K.: The Man and the Myth*, a withering attack on the character and competence of the President. The attacks have continued, and escalated, ever since—in books by historians; in memoirs of friends, associates and acquaintances of Kennedy and his family; in gossip columns and tabloids; and at times in official documents belatedly released. Together, these revelations form a tawdry counterpoint to the much brighter images that continue to dominate Kennedy's popular reputation. Against the heroic, romantic vision of Kennedy as a brilliant young superman stands the picture of an irresponsible libertine who bought his way into the presidency and then shamelessly abused it.

Somewhere between these two images lies the truth. But no one should expect to find it in Hersh's embarrassing book, which recycles virtually every accusation ever leveled at Kennedy, adds very little of consequence to what we already know, and presents it all with a heavy-handed sensationalism that the contents of the book fail to justify. From beginning to end Hersh makes dramatic claims ("They have kept their silence—until now"; "Until this book it has not been known..."), only to present either modestly amplified versions of familiar stories or inflammatory disclosures for which he has no adequate evidence.

Much has been written about Kennedy's squalid covert sex life, his reckless association with men and women tied to organized crime, his father's uninhibited use of family money to oil Jack's political career, his family's extraordinary efforts to hide the truth about themselves and manipulate the press into cooperating with them in that effort. Hersh

adds some significant new detail to all these stories and many others. But he also offers a larger justification for returning to this sordid and oft-trod ground: "Kennedy's private life and personal obsessions—his character—affected the affairs of the nation and its foreign policy far more than has ever been known." Hersh's book fails most conspicuously on that point.

In describing the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, Hersh attempts to explain Kennedy's cancellation of a planned air strike in support of the landing by claiming the President expected Mafia figures recruited by the CIA to have assassinated Castro before the invasion began, and pulled back when he discovered they had not done so. But he has no direct evidence that Kennedy ordered, or even knew of, a plan to assassinate Castro in 1961, and even less

evidence that the failure of such a plan had anything to do with the bombing decision.

Hersh claims to present a "new history" of the Cuban missile crisis that contradicts previously accepted versions. But he offers almost nothing substantively new, other than an unsupported claim that Kennedy allowed himself to be deceived about Soviet intentions by a private, back-channel Kremlin source and hence delayed sending critical reconnaissance missions over Cuba in the fall of 1962. Hersh's clumsy effort to portray Kennedy's handling of the crisis as reckless and politically motivated is a much inferior version of an intelligent, if controversial, argument Garry Wills presented 15 years ago in *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power*. And Hersh's argument that Kennedy deceived the public about his pledge not to invade Cuba and about his private deal to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey in exchange for the Soviet Union's removing theirs from Cuba has been a familiar part of the history of this episode for years.

Hersh's account of Kennedy's policies in Vietnam is perhaps the flimsiest part of this book. Much of what he says is well known: that Kennedy was deeply complicit in the 1963 coup that toppled Ngo Dinh Diem. But Hersh insists that Kennedy not only approved the coup but also knew about and at least acquiesced in plans to murder Diem and his brother. His evidence for this is almost nonexistent: a cryptic, secondhand account of a conversation between Kennedy and CIA agent Edward Lansdale, a vague thirdhand account of a secret visit to Diem in 1963 by the President's friend Torbert Macdonald, the unsupported speculation of officials on the edges of events at the time. He argues that the Kennedy Administration supported the coup because it had received reports that Diem was negotiating a settlement with North Vietnam, which the President feared would be politically damaging to him. Again, Hersh presents no persuasive evidence for this claim.

Reading this book is a depressing experience. In part that is because of its relentless descriptions of the sordid private world of the Kennedy presidency, a world that—although long familiar—never loses its capacity to dismay. But what is even more depressing is to see such shoddy and careless arguments and such self-serving credulity coming from a celebrated investigative reporter. ■

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