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GENERAL BOOK

# Book Review

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## Kennedys: from dream to despair

- **The Kennedys: An American Drama.** Peter Collier & David Horowitz. Summit Books. \$20.95.
- **The Kennedys: Dynasty And Disaster.** John H. Davis. McGraw-Hill Book Co. \$24.95

By Seth Kantor  
Cox News Service

**T**wo books about the Kennedy family have just been published. "The Kennedys: An American Drama," by Peter Collier and David Horowitz, has received the most publicity because of the authors' handling of the death of David Kennedy. But it is by far the less important and impressive of the two.

John Davis' "The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster" is thorough, insightful and analytical. The author's handling of one incident exemplifies this.

In the fall of 1962, just after the Cuban missile crisis, Vice President Lyndon Johnson called in a handful of reporters to conduct a background briefing session. LBJ was angry. He had U-2 spy-plane photographic proof that Russian missiles in strategic Cuban locations were not being dismantled as the Soviets had promised, in the wake of President Kennedy's dramatic showdown on the high seas with advancing Russian ships.

John F. Kennedy had won the confrontation with Nikita Khrushchev. It was an international coup of vast proportions. But in fact the Russian "defensive" missiles were still in place, with enough kick to devastate U.S. cities within an arc that swung from Houston to Washington.

Johnson's message to the reporters was a thinly disguised slam at Kennedy for being content with a public relations victory over Khrushchev. LBJ wanted to get the story out that the real threat to Americans remained and that Kennedy's victory had been an apparition.

Davis handles this important point about an essential flaw in the character of John Kennedy with skill and thoroughness. Davis' massive review of the entire Kennedy family is told with insight in more than 600 pages.

The author is a first cousin of Kennedy's widow, Jacqueline Onassis. He knew her as they were growing up and, through her, he met the young Sen. John Kennedy.

The Davis book provides a diligent, though wordy account of the universe of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and his sons and daughters. Davis does an especially good job of presenting the buildup of hostilities between organized crime in America and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and the relevance of that war to the assassination of the president.

Collier and Horowitz, on the other hand, ignore the assassination as an investigative issue, not caring to hike through furrows of facts and would-be facts that already have been plowed by others.

They also zip through the Cuban missile crisis in four pages that break no new ground.



KATHY INSKEEP/Special

And they find no reason to explore in detail either Bobby Kennedy's murder in Los Angeles or the suicide of Edward M. Kennedy's presidential career at Chappaquiddick.

Although the Collier-Horowitz work is the chief selection for July by the Book-of-the-Month Club, it skims along the surface of the Kennedy generations in a Sunday supplement kind of style.

We get a bizarre look at President Franklin Roosevelt auditioning the family patriarch, Joe Kennedy, for the job of U.S. ambassador to the Court of St. James as Roosevelt commands Kennedy to drop his pants. Can you imagine a Harriman or even a Farley being told by Roosevelt to humble themselves that way in order to win the plum of the diplomatic posts? They would have told him to take the job and shove it. But FDR knew that the status-craving Kennedy would do anything to climb the social ladder.

And FDR was right. Kennedy dropped his pants.

We also are shown a drunken Teddy Kennedy shortly before Chappaquiddick, a shouting, menacing passenger on a commercial flight — an episode unreported by the press at the time, although a number of reporters were on the flight.

But mostly we get nothing new until the final 100 pages. Unlike Davis, the Collier-Horowitz team did not have the advantage of conversations with Kennedy family members, such as the matriarchal Rose or her children. Those Kennedys refused to be interviewed or to supply material to Collier-Horowitz.

It was the late Kirk LeMoine Billings who gave the Collier-Horowitz book the majority of its

new material. Billings was a John Kennedy buddy from young manhood through the White House years. He supplied the authors with recollections and letters that provide the inside touches they had to have.

But it is the final 100 pages that have brought this book its national publicity. There, the authors focus on those few members of the new generation of Kennedys who took to narcotics, booze and aimless drifting.

One of those they talked with and focused on was David Kennedy, a son of RFK, who overdosed and died in Florida three months ago, just in time for the authors to breathlessly rush the information of his tragic death into the last page of their book.

Distraught Kennedy family friends say David overdosed as a result of his final horror at realizing how his cooperation with Collier-Horowitz would lead to family shame and despair.

Meanwhile, the two writers are saying sanctimoniously that they had no intention of cashing in on the tragic private lives of the Kennedy family, even though they did devote the final 22 percent of their book with gusto to the unfulfillments of the present Kennedy generation, wherever the unfulfillments could be found.

Collier and Horowitz have given us a Roosevelt-like view of the Kennedy family, all right — with its pants down. ■

Seth Kantor has been a Washington correspondent since 1962 and covered the White House in the final months of the Kennedy administration.