

COLUMN ONE

# J.F.K. — Greatness in the Eye of the Beholder?

■ Some historians say Kennedy mystique lives on because we embrace a well-honed image that hides many flaws. Defenders say his value was in 'making us believe.'

By JOHN M. BRODER  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

BOSTON—He is venerated as a champion of civil rights when, in reality, he was furious with the Freedom Riders, who forced him to act before he was ready to embrace the cause of racial equality. He is hailed as an apostle of world peace when, in truth, he

was one of the coldest of the Cold warriors and conspired to assassinate some Third World leaders, including Fidel Castro and South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem.

In fact, 30 years after he was killed in Dallas, John F. Kennedy is considered by the American public to have been the greatest of presidents, easily outranking Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt and George Washington. One recent survey even has him tied with Lincoln as the most influential world figure of the past 1,000 years.

And yet Kennedy's public mystique stands in stark contrast to the emerging verdict among historians: that he entered office unprepared and improved little in three years.

He is remembered as an idealist, but students of his presidency

increasingly conclude that he was a cunning and cold-eyed realist, even a cynic. His belated embrace of the civil rights cause was due in large part to political calculation. And a strong case can be made that he would have prosecuted the Vietnam War as vigorously as his successors did, with much the same result.

Revelations about his personal life show him to have been addicted to sex and danger, and to have been under constant medication that may have affected his judgment at critical junctures.

But even if the flesh-and-blood Kennedy falls short of the heroic standard, his memory is accorded mythic stature.

Historians can find only one explanation: the manner of his death. Please see **KENNEDY, A10**



John F. Kennedy

Associated Press

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# KENNEDY: Glowing Image Lingers

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sudden and shocking death.

"The image of Kennedy is not based on what he accomplished but on his promise, the hope he held out," said presidential scholar Stephen Ambrose of the University of New Orleans. "There's a very strong sense that if he had not died, we would not have suffered the 30 years of nightmare that followed—the race riots, the white backlash, assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate, runaway inflation, Iran-Contra.

"People just want to believe that if only J.F.K. had lived, all this wouldn't have happened."

There are other factors: his youth (he was 43 at his inauguration in 1961), his looks, his wit and his irresistible charm. He was the first television President, and he used the medium better than any who followed.

He brought style and zest and optimism to a nation that had embraced the inertia of the 1950s after years of economic depression followed by war. His glamorous family fascinated the world and set a tone for Americans during a phase of unprecedented prosperity, material consumption and economic growth.

"I wish I could have met him. He had a real magic about him," said Marlyne Deibler, 57, of Warminster, Pa., as she gazed upon the flame at Kennedy's grave site at Arlington National Cemetery this past weekend.

"When I saw him on television, he always seemed like a person who would reach out to you and listen to you and understand your feelings," she said. "Given the chance to have stayed in office, he would have done a lot for the country."

Kennedy was blessed with magnificent ghostwriters and speech writers who allowed him to project the image of an intellectual when his tastes ran to Frank Sinatra and starlets.

His Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Profiles in Courage," was helped greatly by Theodore C. Sorensen, his brilliant speech writer, and his earlier bestselling "Why England Slept" benefited from the ministrations of New York Times reporter and family friend Arthur Krock.

This carefully crafted public J.F.K. was eagerly consumed by the American people, who for perhaps the last time suspended their natural disbelief in their leaders.

That suspension was aided by Kennedy's natural reserve, his essential opaqueness, which concealed his true thoughts and feelings from even those closest to him. Those who met with Kennedy left his office believing he agreed with them and would take the action they had recommended. But frequently that was not the case.

His handsome visage and his light-filled eyes were not a window to his soul but rather a mirror for all those who gazed upon them.

"He retained an impenetrability, even to those who thought they knew him well," said historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who has written biographies of the Kennedy family and Lyndon B. Johnson and is completing a book on Roosevelt.

"Because of his death, he remains unfinished. The sense of possibility he left allows people to project back onto him not only what he might have become, but what they and the country might have become," said Goodwin, who is married to former Kennedy aide Richard Goodwin.

It is this mirror-like quality of the Kennedy presidency, Goodwin said, that accounts for the gaping discrepancy between the cool assessments of professional historians and the passionate regard of the public. That and the assassination.

While an admirer of J.F.K. and an intimate of the Kennedy clan, Goodwin says as a historian it would be hard for her to rank Kennedy among the greatest presidents.

"I find this whole thing not just mystifying, but frustrating," she said in an interview in the library of her home in Concord, Mass. "It seems unfair to other presidents, particularly Roosevelt and Lincoln. He has just become what everyone wants him to be. And no one can match that. If he had completed the two terms, however extraordinary they might have been, the mystique he enjoys today could not be equaled."

Unfair, says Charles U. Daly, director of the John F. Kennedy Library overlooking Boston harbor, a video-age reliquary of the J.F.K. legend. Like other Kennedy defenders, Daly said he believes that ordinary historical standards cannot be applied to the 35th President.

He should not be judged by the number of bills signed, treaties negotiated, crises managed and programs initiated, argues Daly, a former J.F.K. White House staff member. Rather, his greatness lies in the "intangibles." If he had not been a great President, Daly asked, "then why the hell are you here 30 years later?"

Daly's own answer: Kennedy must be ranked among the greatest American leaders "for making us really believe."

Indeed, Kennedy served at a time of soaring optimism. His rhetorical legacy is unmatched by later presidents, and his unfinished story is one that will hold allure for generations.

One measure of his impact can be found in the stacks of the Library of Congress. The collection includes 714 books about Kennedy, compared with 685 about Washington and 845 about Lincoln. Lincoln's biographers needed more

than 100 years to match the output on Kennedy in just the past 30.

Of the books that are less than worshipful, two recent studies of his personal behavior attempt to portray him as reckless in his pursuit of women, a manipulator, a pawn of his ambitious, multimillionaire father and a liar.

Daly sniffed at the books—"A Question of Character" by Thomas C. Reeves and "Reckless Youth" by Nigel Hamilton—as the work of "a couple of literary whores" out to

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## KENNEDY

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make a quick buck.

The tales of J.F.K.'s womanizing have been well-trod since the mid-1970s, when Judith Campbell Exner revealed her liaisons with the leader of the free world. Later accounts have placed Kennedy in the clandestine company of dozens of other women.

But the revelations have done little to puncture the Kennedy mystique. In a perverse way, they may have magnified it, putting him in the company of movie, sports and rock stars who live by different rules from the rest of us.

Certainly the instant sense of loss after his assassination propelled the American people into a wave of idolatry more typically reserved for presidents who had withstood the test of time. By the hundreds, schools, roads, bridges, parks and airports were named for him throughout the remainder of the decade.

Perhaps the clearest evolution of the Kennedy legacy occurs among black Americans.

Kennedy tried to discourage Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other black leaders from holding the landmark August, 1963, March on Washington, fearing that it would lead to violence, looting and—more important—a mark-against his Administration.

Despite the civil rights leaders' entreaties, Kennedy refused to participate in the march.

After it concluded peacefully, Kennedy invited King and the others to the White House, where he congratulated them—in private.

One of those leaders, John Lewis, then the 23-year-old chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and now a Democratic congressman from Georgia, said he and other black leaders were incensed by Kennedy's stance. Many protests of the era, he said, were designed to provoke a reluctant Kennedy to act.

"In my own speech during the march, I said that Kennedy's [civil rights] legislation was too little and too late," Lewis said in an interview. "Many of the people in my organization disagreed with him profoundly."

And yet, Lewis said, he has come to appreciate Kennedy for the small strides he took on race, and for the soaring rhetoric that accompanied them.

"He was the first President to pay the issue of race was a moral issue," Lewis said. "That tied him to the black community forever."

But these are all views from the elite. It is at ground level that Kennedy continues to inspire millions of Americans, that his picture still hangs in homes across the land and around the world. Could the experts be wrong and the masses right?

Gilbert Bond thinks so. Bond, 41, who lives with his wife and four children in a modest bungalow in an Atlanta suburb, said Kennedy's critics miss his significance to black families such as his when he was growing up in Kentucky and Southern California as the son of a laborer.

"What they don't capture was



LINDA SCHAEFER / For The Times

Gilbert and Anita Bond tell their children about their memories of the assassination of President Kennedy.

the atmosphere that that man and his wife and his children created for the nation," he said. "There was a tone of hopeful expectancy. Along with that was the pride I felt, and so many other children felt, in a belief that you could do something to make a difference about the issues that were problematic in the country."

Bond, who is working on a doctoral dissertation on religion and literature at Emory University in Atlanta, said John and Robert F. Kennedy and King will always represent a holy "triptych" in African American households.

"I think many black folks, at least many black Christians, start from a foundation that human beings are terribly flawed," Bond said. "And so they don't create a sort of false, pristine image of who people ultimately are. . . . They are not deeply disturbed to find out that, oh, the man was deeply limited in so many ways. For them that is not mutually exclusive."

Bond paused and picked up a Life magazine dated Dec. 6, 1963, the first issue after Kennedy's assassination. He pointed out to his

4-year-old son, Jacob, a photo of a young boy, holding a candle, standing in the rain at a public mourning service in Chicago. A tear rolls down the cheek of the boy in the black-and-white image.

"That's the way Daddy looked when Daddy heard Kennedy died," he told his young son. "Daddy was so sad he cried at school and couldn't eat his lunch. And, when he went out on the playground, no one was playing."

Times researcher Edith Stanley in Atlanta contributed to this story.

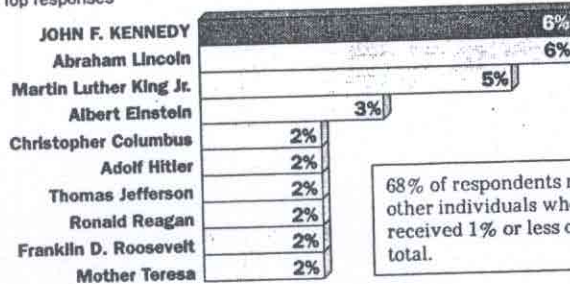
## JFK: Poll vs. Pundits

According to a poll, John F. Kennedy left an indelible mark on history . . .



■ **Question:** "As you may know, every year Time magazine names a Man of the Year. Suppose Time were to name a man or woman of the millenium, someone who for better or for worse has had the most impact on the course of history in the past 1,000 years. Whom would you name?"

Top responses



68% of respondents named other individuals who received 1% or less of the total.

. . . But historians see him differently.

"The historical judgment is really very negative at this point among the majority of my colleagues. . . . Right now on foreign policy, Kennedy is getting an F from most diplomatic historians. On domestic policy, most are writing that nothing was accomplished."

—Stephen Ambrose, presidential scholar at the University of New Orleans

"I don't think that most serious analysts would give him very high marks on anything but style. He wasn't President that long, but in terms of purely positive accomplishments, there weren't many. . . . It was obviously a time of action but not necessarily progress."

—Lee Sigelman, political scientist at George Washington University

Source: Poll of 800 adult Americans taken for Time/CNN in July, 1992, by Yankelovich, Clancy, Shulman.

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