

She Was a Myth, a Symbol and Finally Mortal

To the Editor:

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was in her White House days mythological. In post-White House days, she became a symbol. In her death, she was a person.

Those of us in her generation will never forget the myth of Camelot that was the cut-short Kennedy years. We all knew we were witnessing mythology. But what was wrong with that? Youth, energy, high spirits, wit, talent, all enhanced by wealth. Even then there were Jacqueline Kennedy's personal and private and sometimes not-so-private unhappinesses and pain, which were also part of the world of mythology.

After the horror of that day in November 1963, she became a symbol. Blessed with good looks and the easing that wealth brings, she nevertheless faced the task of forging a life for herself. In doing so, she became a symbol for all people, for women particularly, in that she did overcome.

Precisely because of her advantages, it was in all likelihood even more difficult for her to be accepted as a productive person with skills and abilities. She forged a life for herself and, given the disadvantages of her advantages, became a genuine symbol for women who similarly strive.

Finally, in her death, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis became for the world a person, a woman stricken with cancer. She became extraordinarily real because all her wealth could not halt the unrelenting pace of her killer — any more than that killer stops for the poorest of the poor. The reaper is truly grim. Yet, she obviously confronted that grimness.

When told that medicine could do no more for her, she chose to go home.

MARLENE FISHER-LAVITT
Purchase, N.Y., May 20, 1994

Courage at the End

To the Editor:

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, one of America's most admirable and respected public icons, succumbed to a devastatingly aggressive form of cancer, which was resistant even to our most sophisticated medical treatments. In keeping with her living will, under the guidance of her doctors and with the support of her family, she asked to leave the hospital so she could be at home when her life ended.

All too frequently, patients with terminal illnesses die in the hospital attached to respirators and life-sustaining medications. This becomes a prolonged, painful, emotionally taxing, undignified and enormously expensive ordeal for patients and families, with no change in the long-term

outcome. Had Mrs. Onassis passively allowed the medical system to take charge of her life, she might have lived several more days, even weeks. But at what expense? Richard M. Nixon also took the initiative that prevented prolonging his own death by refusing respirator support.

Death is inevitable, and there is a time to say enough is enough. Health care reformers must recognize the cost savings of home care for the terminally ill. We should learn a lesson from the dignity and courage with which Jacqueline Onassis chose to die.

DOUGLAS J. HART, M.D.
New York, May 20, 1994

The TV Vigil

To the Editor:

The spectacle of journalists gathered outside the home of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to cover her death was sad and sobering. Early in Mrs. Onassis's post-Presidential years I had to stand in front of 1040 Fifth Avenue on stakeout, and I now live nearby. As she lay dying neighbors asked me to defend the tumult caused by a dozen television minivans, several large satellite uplink trucks and bright lights playing on the building's Fifth Avenue facade.

The television journalists who had to do the difficult job also felt the loss. They were orderly and respectful.



Jack Manning/The New York Times

They hoped their lights would not disturb Mrs. Onassis or her family.

Yet it should have been possible to reduce redundant equipment. Pool cameras could have provided adequate coverage at the front of the building. Reporters could have made separate on-camera comments from unilateral camera positions close enough for "presence," but distant enough to reduce the glare.

It's probably fair to say Mrs. Onassis had a love-hate relationship with

the press, particularly the still photographers. If she was aware of the television congregation nearby perhaps that provided a comforting sense of the world's affection for her. I hope so.

STEVE YOUNG
New York, May 20, 1994

The writer is senior correspondent, business news, CNN.

What the Film Shows

To the Editor:

Anna Quindlen repeats in "An Era Ends" (column, May 21) a widespread view of Jacqueline Kennedy's response to the fatal gunshot wound suffered by her husband Nov. 22, 1963. Ms. Quindlen says that "she came out of her seat and onto the back of the car, on her hands, on her knees, on some desperate journey never fully understood." A segment on "20/20" on ABC News reported that Mrs. Kennedy had been "saved" at that moment by a Secret Service agent.

The confusion about what Mrs. Kennedy did results from the rare showing in full on television of the Zapruder film, the only visual record of the assassination. Those who have examined it closely, such as Gerald Posner, in connection with "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of J.F.K." (1993), have been interested in the film primarily as it relates to the President's death. Mr. Posner says only that when Mrs. Kennedy started to climb from the car she was pushed back inside by Clint Hill, a Secret Service agent, who had leapt onto the back bumper.

However, as I view the Zapruder film, it shows the following sequence: The first shot to hit the President exited from his throat. Mrs. Kennedy leaned toward him and took him in her arms just as the second and fatal shot shattered the President's skull. The open car, which had almost come to a stop, then accelerated. Mrs. Kennedy at once released the President, climbed onto the rear deck of the speeding limousine — fully exposing herself to sniper fire — and stretched out her arm to agent Hill. Rather than pushing her back, he grasped it and, with her pulling, scrambled over the deck. They both fell into the car.

Much has been said about Mrs. Kennedy's courage and strength in the post-assassination period. But as I see it, she was gallant from the start, risking herself to help agent Hill, rather than looking to her own safety. It would be good to hear from someone with a copy of the Zapruder film to know if it supports this interpretation.

WILLIAM L. O'NEILL
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New Brunswick, N.J., May 21, 1994

*CONTRADICTING THE SINGLE BULLET THEORY CONCLUSION