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Assessing J.F.K.

Historians Lost in Mists of 'Camelot'

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WASHINGTON—It has been a quarter of a century since he died, but historians still do not know how to cope with John F. Kennedy.

The loss of the vibrant, young President on Nov. 22, 1963, was so abrupt, so cruel, so numbing, so void of reason, so terrifying that it transformed him into an eternal light in the hearts of Americans and cast his life into legend.

Many historians now downgrade the accomplishments of Kennedy's short-lived Administration. They look on him as a tragic figure who reached far but grasped less, a hero cut down with much of his promise unfulfilled. But the legend of Kennedy has become so rock-like and glorious that historians find it confusing and nettlesome to reach sure judgments about him.

Man Became Legend

"A lot of historians who try to be fair-minded have a lot of trouble with Kennedy," said William E. Leuchtenburg, professor of history at the University of North Carolina. "We are far from having our minds made up about him. He is now a part of mythology rather than history, and historians are not likely to have much impact, since he is removed from ordinary discourse. . . . But we keep on taking our own temperature about what we think of Kennedy."

In a recent issue, American Heritage magazine published the replies of more than 40 historians invited to name "the single most overrated public figure" in "all of American history." Eight named Kennedy. No one else came close.

Yet the survey did not tell the full story. Although many distinguished American historians tend to discount Kennedy's achievements in their conversations and writings, they still tend to rate him higher than their disparaging comments might lead you to suspect.

More Than a Myth

"The feeling of historians is that the Camelot myth was just a myth," said Herbert Parmet of the City University of New York, a recent Kennedy biographer, "but historians are not about to denigrate him, either. They recognize him as articulate and as a force who inspired the world. He represented the best of American idealism."

There is no doubt what most Americans think about Kennedy. In June, 1985, a Gallup poll asked a sampling of them to identify the three greatest presidents. Kennedy was named most often—by 56% of those polled—followed by Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman and George Washington.

This popularity is powering a host of television shows and books commemorating the 25th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination this month. Some of the shows dredge up the most fanciful of the conspiracy theories about the crime. Publishers are reprinting his speeches. Life magazine is reproducing its issue of that week in 1963, chronicling the President's death, the mournful drama that followed and Jacqueline Kennedy's

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famous lament to writer Theodore White, that "there'll never be another Camelot again."

The dynamism of Kennedy in American mythology was underscored by the single most memorable quotation of the 1988 presidential election campaign, when Democratic vice presidential candidate Lloyd Bentsen chastised his Republican opponent, Dan Quayle, during their televised debate on Oct. 5: "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy."

Quayle, who had described his own political background as much like Kennedy's before 1960, was obviously deflated by Bentsen's sharp thrust.

'No Kennedy, Either'

"People forget that Jack Kennedy was no Jack Kennedy, either," Robert K. Murray, a Pennsylvania State University historian, observed. "He was no Lyndon Johnson or Robert Dole or Robert Taft, as a senator."

Murray conducted a survey in

1982, and found that 940 scholars ranked Kennedy as an above-average President. He was rated 13th among 36 (Ronald Reagan and short-termers William Henry Harrison and James A. Garfield were not considered).

The historians ranked four presidents (Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Washington and Thomas Jefferson) as great. Four others (Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Jackson and Truman) were rated nearly great, and six (John Adams, Lyndon B. Johnson, Dwight D. Eisenhower, James K. Polk, Kennedy and James Madison) were judged above average. Although their assessment of Kennedy did not reach the soaring heights of his general popularity, the scholars did place him in distinguished company.

Murray, whose book, "Greatness in the White House," is to be published next month, expects Kennedy's standing to decline. "As people are removed from the Camelot years, as you move beyond that and are left to look at only the record of his actual achievements," Murray said, "his reputation will inevitably decline, simply because the great achievements are not there. He will never decline far, but he is not going to climb higher.

Only Record Remains

"As eons go by, take 50 years, take 100 years from now," Murray continued, "the only way they will have to be able to understand what Kennedy did is by reading about it on a sheet of paper. That's a little less grabbing, isn't it, than if you feel it in your heart?"

In assessing the achievements of Kennedy, historians tend to focus on two areas: his role in setting policies that ultimately entangled the United States in Vietnam and his Administration's record on civil rights legislation. In both, judgments tend to be negative.

Although there were only 16,000 American troops in Vietnam when Kennedy died, the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in an American-supported coup just three weeks earlier had ensured irrevocable U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese turmoil. Defenders of Kennedy believe his sophistication and pragmatism would have kept him from expanding the conflict into a large-scale war, as Johnson did a few years later, but there is, of course, no way of knowing this for sure.

"I think his foreign policy has to be assessed in terms of what eventually came of it," Yale University historian C. Vann Woodward said. "The heritage of Vietnam—that must be laid at his door partly, certainly not wholly."

Didn't Push Legislation

On civil rights, most historians agree that Kennedy, despite his inspiring rhetoric and some dramatic actions to enforce school desegregation in the South, moved hesitantly and made little effort to push his legislative proposals in a reluctant Congress. The landmark civil rights legislation was passed later, during the Johnson Administration.

"On civil rights," said Woodward, "I think Kennedy went into that with considerable hesitation and Johnson with considerable conviction."

"Kennedy, basically, thought that he needed to get through that first term," David Donald of Harvard University said. "He was not going way out on a limb for any cause, including civil rights. Nobody knows whether he would have done something about civil rights in the second term. My hunch is that he probably was serious."

Some defenders have argued that Kennedy, in death, deserves full credit for the passage of civil rights laws under Johnson. Without the national shock and shame that followed the assassination, they insist, Congress would never have enacted Johnson's bills. "But that's a backhanded way of analyzing a great President," Murray of Penn State said.

On the other hand, historians usually credit Kennedy with cool, statesmanlike performance during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. By ordering a naval blockade but ruling out an air strike that might have set off an uncontrollable conflagration, Kennedy forced Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev to remove the missiles secretly installed in Cuba. Kennedy's firmness and calm at the time were seen as having helped the nation avoid disaster.

Some historians, however, insist that the crisis erupted only because Kennedy had caused the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 and faltered at the summit with Khrushchev in Vienna that same year. An emboldened Khrushchev, according to this view, was convinced that he had a

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Group of schoolchildren, born long after John F. Kennedy's death, ponder former President's grave at Arlington National Cemetery.

weak adversary. Other historians believe Kennedy's aggressive demeanor provoked Khrushchev into sending the missiles for Cuba's defense, but these are minority views.

On one issue there is nearly unanimous approval. Almost all historians agree that Kennedy's creation of the Peace Corps was a remarkable and lasting achievement. With this volunteer program for developing nations, he channeled youthful American exuberance and idealism into constructive, generous activities displayed to the world.

The Peace Corps, in fact, rivals the image of Camelot as a lasting symbol of the Kennedy era.

No problem troubles historians more than the question of style or mood or atmosphere that Kennedy's admirers considered a central element of his presidency.

Outstanding in Style

"Style is something we talk about with almost no other President," Leuchtenburg said, then hesitated. "Why do I say almost? About no other President is so much said about style."

The word has a negative ring to it. It sounds, in the old cliche, like a substitute for substance. Yet many historians, especially those who remember the Kennedy years firsthand, say there was something both substantial and meaningful about the Kennedy style: He set a standard of openness and intelligence and creativity and elegance that has not been rivaled since.

Artists such as cellist Pablo Casals and violinist Isaac Stern and writers such as poet Robert Frost were welcome at the White House. Intellectuals felt there was a place for them in government.

"That's the one thing that lingers, in fact, mostly because all the administrations since then have been so notably deficient in charm and style," said Donald, who once lectured about Abraham Lincoln before Kennedy and his staff at the White House.

"There's a difference between inviting Pablo Casals to the White House and arguing whether you should have the Beach Boys as a suitable representative for America. It tells you a lot about the difference in tone."

Yet to some that style—though cherished then—is fading somewhat now. "It made a pretty picture, the Camelot myth and all that," said Woodward. "The Camelot myth told us a lot about the excitement and the expectations, nothing about the reality."

An unusual perspective on the atmosphere of the Kennedy years comes from Marcus Cunliffe, long regarded as one of Britain's most respected scholars of the American presidency and a teacher at George Washington University.

"It's taken quite a while for me to demystify and demythologize Kennedy," Cunliffe said in his book-crammed office in Washington. "The general feeling now is that he was all front, isn't it?"

Cunliffe believes, however, that a decline in Kennedy's standing among Europeans parallels a decline in the standing of the United States as well. "My view of Kennedy changed along with that of many other people," he said. "It's part of the cynicism that one feels

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toward the United States in the last 15 years.

"Once, if you wanted to find something fresh and original in art or music or architecture or ideas, you would go to the United States. That has changed. There is a general sense of disappointment and dismay about the United States."

For historians, some of the gloss associated with Kennedy dissipated with the revelations about his womanizing, with the most sensational allegations coming from Judith Campbell Exner, an associate

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of two gangsters who told a news conference in 1975 about her affair with the President. "Kennedy's womanizing doesn't seem to matter," said Cunliffe, "but he didn't seem to have much taste."

Yet those revelations evidently have not diminished the regard most Americans feel for Kennedy. "In a peculiar way, it adds to the romantic appeal," Parmet said. "It adds to that, and perhaps makes him more human. It hasn't hurt him. I thought it would, but I think it doesn't."

Historical assessments of Kennedy have moved through three cycles since his assassination. A little more than a year after his death, his associates, Theodore C. Sorensen and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., wrote the first biographies, in which they reveled in adulation. Sorensen and Schlesinger are often described as "the court historians."

Schlesinger, now a professor at the City University of New York, was a well-known historian before he joined the White House staff. His biography of Kennedy, "A Thousand Days," was widely acclaimed and quoted at the time.

"Lifting us beyond our capacities," Schlesinger wrote of Kennedy, "he gave his country back to its best self, wiping away the world's impression of an old nation of old men, weary, played out, fearful of ideas, change and the future; he taught mankind that the process of rediscovering America was not over."

A decade after the assassination, revisionists, rebelling against all the adulation, began to hack away at the myth of Kennedy. Some of their criticism, rooted in the disillusionments of the Vietnam War and of Watergate, was harsh.

The revisionists dismissed Kennedy's inaugural speech as "posturing heroics." They characterized him as a cold war counterrevolutionary who embroiled the United States in Vietnam. They mocked his civil rights record as milquetoast and inadequate and discovered the roots of the Watergate scandal in his "imperial presidency."

Even the Peace Corps was ridiculed as a public-relations gimmick designed to cloak American imperialism abroad.

More recently, historians have tended to look on Kennedy with far more balance, detailing his shortcomings without shrillness and recounting his achievements without adulation. Parmet, in two volumes published in 1980 and 1983, has written probably the most thorough of the balanced assessments.

Los Angeles Times

J.F.K. Era Survivors, Then and Now

Here is a look at what has become of some of the key figures associated with President John F. Kennedy:

McGeorge Bundy, now 69, was Kennedy's special assistant for national security affairs. In Kennedy's words, Bundy was one of his "inner circle" of advisers who met daily with the President and counseled him in times of crisis. After the assassination, Bundy continued as a special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson, and he became one of the shapers of Johnson's Vietnam War policy. He left government in February, 1966, to be president of the Ford Foundation, where he remained until he accepted a teaching job at New York University in 1979.

John B. Connally, 71, was secretary of the Navy in the first year of the Kennedy Administration. As the Democratic governor of Texas (1963-1969), he was in the presidential limousine when Kennedy was shot in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, and he suffered a serious chest wound. In 1971, he returned to Washington to serve as President Richard M. Nixon's secretary of the Treasury for one year. The Watergate grand jury indicted him in 1974 on bribery and perjury charges, in connection with an increase in federal milk price supports, but he was acquitted. In 1979, as a Republican, he entered the race for President but won only one delegate to the Republican National Convention. Earlier this year, as a Texas businessman millions of dollars in debt, he declared bankruptcy.

Edward M. Kennedy, 56, the youngest of the Kennedy brothers, is the only one still living. Reelected this year, he has served in the Senate since 1963 as one of its foremost liberal voices. He ran for the 1980 Democratic presidential nomination but lost it to Jimmy Carter.

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, 59, married Sen. John F. Kennedy in 1953. She and her two children earned worldwide respect for their conduct in the aftermath of the President's assassination. In 1968, she married Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis. He died in 1975. Jackie Onassis has been an editor at Doubleday since 1977.

John F. Kennedy Jr., 27, was three days short of his third birthday, a toddler known as John-John, when his father was killed. He has been graduated from Brown University and is studying law at New York University.

Robert S. McNamara, 72, was one of the most controversial Cabinet members of the postwar era. As defense secretary from January, 1961, until February, 1968, he was a leading architect of Vietnam policy. In the Kennedy Administration, he worked to bring the military services under strong civilian control. He left the Johnson Administration to become president of the World Bank. He retired in 1981 and wrote a 1986 book on arms control, "Blundering Into Disaster."

Lawrence O'Brien, 71, one of Kennedy's closest political advisers, was his special assistant for congressional relations and personnel. He kept that position under Johnson and served as postmaster general, then a Cabinet position, from 1965 until 1968. In 1969, he was elected chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and as such became the principal target of the Watergate burglars during the 1972 presidential campaign. He served as president of the National Basketball Assn. from 1975 to 1984.

David Powers, 77, was known for his Irish humor during the years he served as a political operative and close friend to Kennedy. As a White House special assistant, he worked under the President's appointments secretary. Powers stayed at the White House until 1965, when he resigned to become curator of the Kennedy Library in Massachusetts.

Dean Rusk, 79, was secretary of state throughout the Kennedy and Johnson years. Rusk helped Johnson carry out his Vietnam policy and became a staunch defender of the war. He left office in 1969 to become a professor of international law at the University of Georgia.

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., 71, a noted historian, was a special assistant to Kennedy assigned to follow Latin American affairs. In this position, he helped shape American policy calling for the economic and political isolation of Cuba. His best-selling book about the Kennedy Administration won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1966. He also served as a presidential campaign adviser to Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in 1968, Sen. George S. McGovern in 1972 and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy in 1980.

Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, 31, was 6 years old when her father was killed. Like her mother and brother, she has tried to stay out of the public eye since then. She studied at Radcliffe College and the Columbia University Law School. In 1986, she married design executive, author and poet Edwin Arthur Schlossberg. She gave birth on June 25 to a daughter, Rose, named for John Kennedy's mother.

Theodore C. Sorensen, 60, one of Kennedy's closest aides, served as special counsel to the President throughout his Administration. Sorensen was Kennedy's leading speech writer, and he and his staff shaped most of the Administration's legislative agenda and took a leading role in formulating policy toward Cuba. After Kennedy's death, Sorensen traveled and lectured, then joined a New York law firm in 1966, where he still practices. He tried unsuccessfully to capture New York's Democratic Senate nomination in 1970, and was an adviser to Democratic presidential candidate Michael S. Dukakis this year.